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What is SEO?

Search Engine Optimisation in 2016 is a technical, analytical and creative process to improve the visibility of a website in search engines, with the aim of driving more potential customers to it.

These free SEO tips will help you create a successful SEO friendly website yourself, based on my 15 years experience making websites rank in Google. If you need optimisation services – see my [SEO audit](#).

An Introduction

This is a beginner's guide to effective white hat SEO. I deliberately steer clear of techniques that might be 'grey hat', as what is grey today is often 'black hat' tomorrow, as far as Google is concerned.

No one-page guide can explore this complex topic in full. What you'll read here are answers to questions I had when I was starting out in this field.

The 'Rules.'

Google insists webmasters adhere to their 'rules' and aims to reward sites with **high-quality content** and **remarkable 'white hat' web marketing techniques** with **high rankings**.

Conversely, it also *needs* to penalise websites that manage to rank in Google by breaking these rules.

These rules are not 'laws', but 'guidelines', for ranking in Google; lay down *by* Google. You should note, however, that some methods of ranking in Google are, in fact, illegal. Hacking, for instance, is illegal in the UK and US.

You can choose to follow and abide by these rules, bend them or ignore them – all with different levels of success (and levels of retribution, from Google's web spam team).

White hats do it by the 'rules'; *black hats* ignore the 'rules'.

What you read in this article is perfectly within the laws and also within the guidelines and will help you increase the traffic to your website through organic, or natural search engine results pages (SERPs).

Definition

There are a lot of definitions of SEO (spelled Search engine optimisation in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, or search engine optimization in the United States and Canada) but organic SEO in 2016 is mostly about getting free traffic from Google, the most popular search engine in the world (and almost the only game in town in the UK):



Opportunity

The art of web SEO lies in understanding how people search for things and understanding what type of results Google wants to (or will) display to its users. It's about putting a lot of things together to look for opportunity.

A good optimiser has an understanding of how search engines like Google generate their natural SERPs to satisfy users' **navigational**, **informational** and **transactional** keyword queries.

Risk Management

A good search engine marketer has a good understanding of the short term and long term risks involved in optimising rankings in search engines, and an understanding of the type of content and sites Google (*especially*) WANTS to return in its natural SERPs.

The aim of any campaign is more visibility in search engines and this would be a simple process if it were not for the many pitfalls.

There are rules to be followed or ignored, risks to take, gains to m, and battles to be won or lost.

Free Traffic

A Mountain View spokesman once called the search engine ‘*kingmakers*’, and that’s no lie.

Ranking high in Google is VERY VALUABLE – it’s effectively ‘free advertising’ on the best advertising space in the world.

Traffic from Google natural listings is STILL the most valuable organic traffic to a website in the world, and it can make or break an online business.

The state of play, in 2016, is that you can STILL generate highly targeted leads, for FREE, *just* by improving your website and optimising your content to be as relevant as possible for a customer looking for your company, product or service.

As you can imagine, there’s a LOT of competition now for that free traffic – even from Google (!) in some niches.

You shouldn’t compete with Google. You *should* focus on competing with your competitors.

The Process

The process can be practised, successfully, in a bedroom or a workplace, but it has traditionally always involved mastering many skills as they arose including diverse marketing technologies including but not limited to:

- Website design
- Accessibility
- Usability
- User experience
- Website development
- PHP, HTML, CSS etc.
- Server management
- Domain management
- Copywriting
- Spreadsheets
- Backlink analysis
- Keyword research
- Social media promotion
- Software development
- Analytics and data analysis
- Information architecture
- Research
- Looking at Google for hours on end

It takes a lot, in 2016, to rank on merit a page in Google in competitive niches.

User Experience

The big stick Google is hitting every Webmaster with (at the moment, and for the foreseeable future) is the '**QUALITY USER EXPERIENCE**' stick.

If you expect to rank in Google in 2016, you'd better have a quality offering, not based entirely on manipulation, or old school tactics.

Is a visit to your site a [*good user experience*](#)?

If not – beware manual '*Quality Raters*' and beware the *Google Panda/Site Quality* algorithms that are looking for [*low-quality content*](#) and other issues that Google classifies as a *poor user experience* for its users.

Google raising the 'quality bar', year on year, ensures a higher level of quality in online marketing in general (above the very low-quality we've seen over the last years).

Success online involves investment in higher quality on-page content, website architecture, usability, conversion to optimisation balance, and promotion.

If you don't take that route, you'll find yourself chased down by Google's algorithms at some point in the coming year.

This '*what is SEO*' guide (and this entire website) is not about churn and burn type of Google SEO (called web spam to Google) as that is too risky to deploy on a real business website in 2016.

What Is A Successful Strategy?

Get relevant. Get trusted. Get Popular.

It is no longer *just* about manipulation in 2016.

It's about adding quality and often useful content to your website that together meet a PURPOSE that delivers USER SATISFACTION.

If you are serious about getting more free traffic from search engines, get ready to invest time and effort in your website and online marketing.

Quality Signals

Google wants to rank QUALITY documents in its results, and force those who wish to rank high to invest in higher-quality content or great service that attracts editorial links from reputable websites.

If you're willing to add a lot of great content to your website, and create buzz about your company, Google will rank you high.

If you try to manipulate Google, it will penalise you for a period, and often until you fix the offending issue – which we know can LAST YEARS.

Backlinks in general, for instance, are STILL weighed FAR too positively by Google and they are manipulated to drive a site to the top positions – for a while. That's why black hats do it – and they have the business model to do it. It's the easiest way to rank a site, still today.

If you are a real business who intends to build a brand online – you can't use black hat methods. Full stop.

If you have been penalised by Google, fixing the problems will not necessarily bring organic traffic back as it was.

Recovery from a Google penalty is a 'growth' process as much as it is a 'clean-up' process.

Google Rankings Are In Constant Ever-Flux

It's Google's job to MAKE MANIPULATING SERPs HARD.

So – the people behind the algorithms keep 'moving the goalposts', modifying the 'rules' and raising 'quality standards' for pages that compete for top ten rankings.

In 2016 – we have ever-flux in the SERPs – and that seems to suit Google and keep everybody guessing.

Google is very secretive about its ‘secret sauce’ and offers sometimes helpful and sometimes vague advice – and some say offers misdirection – about how to get more from valuable traffic from Google.

Google is on record as saying the engine is intent on ‘frustrating’ search engine optimisers attempts to improve the amount of high-quality traffic to a website – at least (but not limited to) – using low-quality strategies classed as web spam.

At its core, Google search engine optimisation is still about **KEYWORDS** and **LINKS**. It’s about **RELEVANCE**, **REPUTATION** and **TRUST**. It is about **QUALITY OF CONTENT & VISITOR SATISFACTION**.

*A **Good USER EXPERIENCE*** is a key to winning – and keeping – the highest rankings in many verticals.

Relevance, Authority & Trust

Web page optimisation is about making a web page being relevant enough for a query, and being trusted enough to rank for it.

It's about ranking for valuable keywords for the long term, on merit. You can play by 'white hat' rules laid down by Google, and aim to build this *Authority* and *Trust* naturally, over time, or you can choose to ignore the rules and go full time 'black hat'.

MOST SEO tactics still work, for some time, on some level, depending on who's doing them, and how the campaign is deployed.

Whichever route you take, know that if Google catches you trying to modify your rank using overtly obvious and manipulative methods, then they *will* class you a web spammer, and your site will be penalised (you will not rank high for relevant keywords).

These penalties can last years if not addressed, as some penalties expire and some do not – and Google wants you to clean up any violations.

Google does not want you to try and modify where you rank, easily. Critics would say Google would prefer you paid them to do that using Google Adwords.

The problem for Google is – ranking high in Google organic listings is a real social proof for a business, a way to avoid PPC costs and still, simply, the BEST WAY to drive VALUABLE traffic to a site.

It's FREE, too, once you've met the always-increasing criteria it takes to rank top.

Google Penalties

In 2016, you need to be aware that what works to improve your rank can also get you penalised (faster, and a lot more noticeably).

In particular, the Google web spam team is currently waging a PR war on sites that rely on [unnatural links](#) and other ‘manipulative’ tactics (and handing out severe penalties if it detects them). And that’s on top of many algorithms already designed to look for other manipulative tactics (like **keyword stuffing** or **boilerplate text** across pages).

Google is making sure it takes longer to see results from black **and** white hat SEO, and intent on ensuring a flux in its SERPs based largely on where the searcher is in the world at the time of the search, and where the business is located near to that searcher.

There are some things you cannot directly influence legitimately to improve your rankings, but there is plenty you CAN do to drive more Google traffic to a web page.

Ranking Factors

Google has HUNDREDS of ranking factors with signals that can change daily, weekly, monthly or yearly to help it work out where your page ranks in comparison to other competing pages in SERPs.

You will not ever find every ranking factor. Many ranking factors are on-page or on-site and others are off-page or off-site. Some ranking factors are based on where you are, or what you have searched for before.

I’ve been in online marketing for 15 years. In that time, a lot has changed. I’ve learned to focus on aspects that offer the greatest return on investment of your labour.

Learn SEO Basics....

Here are few simple SEO tips to begin with:

- If you are just starting out, don't think you can fool Google about everything all the time. Google has VERY probably seen your tactics before. So, it's best to **keep your plan simple**. GET RELEVANT. GET REPUTABLE. Aim for a good, satisfying visitor experience. If you are just starting out – you may as well learn how to do it within [Google's Webmaster Guidelines](#) first. Make a decision, early, if you are going to follow Google's guidelines, or not, and stick to it. Don't be caught in the middle with an important project. Do not always follow the herd.
- If your aim is to deceive visitors from Google, in any way, Google is not your friend. Google is hardly your friend at any rate – but you don't want it as your enemy. Google will send you lots of free traffic though if you manage to get to the top of search results, so perhaps they are not all that bad.
- A lot of optimisation techniques that are effective in boosting sites rankings in Google are against Google's guidelines. For example many links that may have once promoted you to the top of Google, may, in fact, today be hurting your site and its ability to rank high in Google. Keyword stuffing might be holding your page back.... You must be smart, and cautious, when it comes to building links to your site in a manner that Google *hopefully* won't have too much trouble with, in the FUTURE. Because they *will* punish you in the future.
- Don't expect to rank number 1 in any niche for a competitive without a lot of investment, work. Don't expect results overnight. Expecting too much too fast might get you in trouble with the spam team.
- You don't pay anything to get into Google, Yahoo or Bing natural, or free listings. It's common for the major search engines to find your website pretty easily by themselves within a few days. This is made so much easier if your website actually 'pings' search engines when you update content (via XML sitemaps or RSS for instance).
- To be listed and rank high in Google and other search engines, you really should consider and largely abide by search engine rules and [official guidelines for inclusion](#). With experience and a lot of observation, you can learn which rules can be bent, and which tactics is short term and perhaps, should be avoided.
- Google ranks websites (relevancy aside for a moment) by the number and quality of incoming links to a site from other websites (amongst hundreds of other metrics). Generally speaking, a link from a page to another page is viewed in Google "eyes" as a vote for that page the link points to. The more votes a page gets, the more trusted a page can become, and the higher Google will rank it – in theory. Rankings are HUGELY affected by how much Google ultimately trusts the DOMAIN the page is on. BACKLINKS (links from other websites – trump every other signal.)

- I've always thought if you are serious about ranking – do so with ORIGINAL COPY. It's clear – search engines reward good content it hasn't found before. It indexes it blisteringly fast, for a start (within a second, if your website isn't penalised!). So – make sure each of your pages has enough text content you have written specifically for that page – and you won't need to jump through hoops to get it ranking.
- If you have original, quality content on a site, you also have a chance of generating inbound quality links (IBL). If your content is found on other websites, you will find it hard to get links, and it probably will not rank very well as Google favours diversity in its results. If you have [decent original content](#) on your site, you can then let authority websites – those with [online business authority](#) – know about it, and they might link to you – this is called a **quality backlink**.
- Search engines need to understand a link is a link. Links can be designed to be ignored by search engines with the [rel nofollow](#) attribute.
- Search engines can also find your site by other websites linking to it. You can also [submit your site to search engines](#) direct, but I haven't submitted any site to a search engine in the last ten years – you probably don't need to do that. If you have a new site, I would immediately register it with Google Webmaster Tools these days.
- Google and Bing use a crawler (Googlebot and Bingbot) that spiders the web looking for new links to find. These bots might find a link to your homepage somewhere on the web and then crawl and index the pages of your site if all your pages are linked together. If your website has an XML sitemap, for instance, Google will use that to include that content in its index. An XML sitemap is INCLUSIVE, not EXCLUSIVE. Google will crawl and index every single page on your site – even pages out with an XML sitemap.
- Many think Google will not allow new websites to rank well for competitive terms until the web address “ages” and acquires “trust” in Google – I think this depends on the quality of the incoming links. Sometimes your site will rank high for a while then disappears for months. A “honeymoon period” to give you a taste of Google traffic, no doubt.
- Google WILL classify your site when it crawls and indexes your site – and this classification can have a DRASTIC effect on your rankings – it's important for Google to work out WHAT YOUR ULTIMATE INTENT IS – do you want to be classified as an affiliate site made ‘just for Google’, a domain holding page or a small business website with a real purpose? Ensure you don't confuse Google by being explicit with all the signals you can – to show on your website you are a real business, and your INTENT is genuine – and even more importantly today – FOCUSED ON SATISFYING A VISITOR.
- NOTE – If a page exists only to make money from Google's free traffic – Google calls this spam. I go into this more, later in this guide.

- The transparency you provide on your website in text and links about who you are, what you do, and how you're rated on the web or as a business is one way that Google could use (algorithmically and manually) to 'rate' your website. Note that Google has a HUGE army of quality raters and at some point they will be on your site if you get a lot of traffic from Google.
- To rank for specific keyword phrase searches, you usually need to have the keyword phrase or highly relevant words on your page (not necessarily all together, but it helps) or in links pointing to your page/site.
- Ultimately what you need to do to compete is largely dependent on what the competition for the term you are targeting is doing. You'll need to at least mirror how hard they are competing if a better opportunity is hard to spot.
- As a result of other quality sites linking to your site, the site now has a certain amount of *real* [PageRank](#) that is shared with all the internal pages that make up your website that will in future help provide a signal to where this page ranks in the future.
- Yes, you need to build links to your site to acquire more PageRank, or Google 'juice' – or what we now call *domain authority* or *trust*. Google is a link-based search engine – it does not quite understand 'good' or 'quality' content – but it does understand 'popular' content. It can also usually identify poor, or THIN CONTENT – and it penalises your site for that – or – at least – it takes away the traffic you once had with an algorithm change. Google doesn't like calling actions the take a 'penalty' – it doesn't look good. They blame your ranking drops on their engineers getting better at identifying quality content or links, or the inverse – low-quality content and unnatural links. If they do take action your site for paid links – they call this a 'Manual Action' and you will get notified about it in Webmaster Tools if you [sign up](#).
- [Link building](#) is not JUST a numbers game, though. One link from a "trusted authority" site in Google could be all you need to rank high in your niche. Of course, the more "trusted" links you attract, the more Google will trust your site. It is evident you need MULTIPLE trusted links from MULTIPLE trusted websites to get the most from Google in 2016.
- Try and get links within page text pointing to your site with relevant, or at least, natural looking, keywords in the text link – not, for instance, in blogrolls or site-wide links. Try to ensure the links are not obviously "machine generated" e.g. site-wide links on forums or directories. Get links from pages, that in turn, have a lot of links to them, and you will soon see benefits.
- Onsite, consider linking to your other pages by [linking to them within text](#). I usually only do this when it is relevant – often, I'll link to relevant pages when the keyword is in the title elements of both pages. I don't go in for auto-generating links at all. Google has penalised sites for using particular auto link plugins, for instance, so I avoid them.

- Linking to a page with actual key-phrases in the link help a great deal in all search engines when you want to feature for specific key terms. For example; “SEO Scotland” as opposed to <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk> or “click here“. Saying that – in 2016, Google is punishing manipulative [anchor text](#) very aggressively, so be sensible – and stick to brand mentions and plain URL links that build authority with less risk. I rarely ever optimise for grammatically incorrect terms these days (especially with links).
- I think the anchor text links in internal navigation is still valuable – but keep it natural. Google needs links to find and help categorise your pages. Don’t underestimate the value of a clever internal link keyword-rich architecture and be sure to understand for instance how many words Google counts in a link, but don’t overdo it. Too many links on a page could be seen as a poor user experience. Avoid lots of hidden links in your template navigation.
- Search engines like Google ‘spider’ or ‘crawl’ your entire site by following all the links on your site to new pages, much as a human would click on the links of your pages. Google will crawl and index your pages, and within a few days normally, begin to return your pages in SERPs.
- After a while, Google will know about your pages, and keep the ones it deems ‘useful’ – pages with original content, or pages with a lot of links to them. The rest will be de-indexed. Be careful – too many low-quality pages on your site will impact your overall site performance in Google. Google is on record talking about good and bad ratios of quality content to low-quality content.
- Ideally, you will have unique pages, with [unique page titles](#) and [unique page descriptions](#). Google does not seem to use the meta description when ranking your page for specific keyword searches if not relevant and unless you are careful if you might end up just giving spammers free original text for their site and not yours once they scrape your descriptions and put the text in main content on their site. I don’t worry about [meta keywords](#) these days as Google and Bing say they either ignore them or use them as spam signals.
- Google will take some time to analyse your entire site, examining text content and links. This process is taking longer and longer these days but is ultimately determined by your domain reputation and real PageRank.
- If you have a lot of duplicate low-quality text already found by Googlebot on other websites it knows about; Google will ignore your page. If your site or page has spammy signals, Google will penalise it, sooner or later. If you have lots of these pages on your site – Google will ignore most of your website.
- You don’t need to keyword stuff your text to beat the competition.
- You optimise a page for more traffic by increasing the frequency of the desired key phrase, related key terms, co-occurring keywords and synonyms in links, page titles and

text content. There is no [ideal amount of text](#) – no magic [keyword density](#). Keyword stuffing is a tricky business, too, these days.

- I prefer to make sure I have as many UNIQUE relevant words on the page that make up as many relevant long tail queries as possible.
- If you link out to irrelevant sites, Google may ignore the page, too – but again, it depends on the site in question. Who you link to, or HOW you link to, REALLY DOES MATTER – I expect Google to use your linking practices as a potential means by which to classify your site. Affiliate sites, for example, don't do well in Google these days without some good quality backlinks and higher quality pages.
- Many search engine marketers think who you link out to (and who links to you) helps determine a topical community of sites in any field or a hub of authority. Quite simply, you want to be in that hub, at the centre if possible (however unlikely), but at least in it. I like to think of this one as a good thing to remember in the future as search engines get even better at determining topical relevancy of pages, but I have never really seen any granular ranking benefit (for the page in question) from linking out.
- I've got by, by thinking external links to other sites should probably be on single pages deeper in your site architecture, with the pages receiving all your Google Juice once it's been "soaked up" by the higher pages in your site structure (the home page, your category pages). This tactic is old school but I still follow it. I don't need to think you need to worry about that, too much, in 2016.
- Original content is king and will attract a "natural link growth" – in Google's opinion. Too many incoming links too fast might devalue your site, but again. I usually err on the safe side – I always aimed for massive diversity in my links – to make them look 'more natural'. Honestly, I go for natural links in 2016 full stop, for this website.
- Google can devalue whole sites, individual pages, template generated links and individual links if Google deems them "unnecessary" and a 'poor user experience'.
- Google knows who links to you, the "quality" of those links, and whom you link to. These – and other factors – help ultimately determine where a page on your site ranks. To make it more confusing – the page that ranks on your site might not be the page you want to rank, or even the page that determines your rankings for this term. Once Google has worked out your domain authority – sometimes it seems that the most relevant page on your site Google HAS NO ISSUE with will rank.
- Google decides which pages on your site are important or most relevant. You can help Google by linking to your important pages and ensuring at least one page is well optimised amongst the rest of your pages for your desired key phrase. Always remember Google does not want to rank 'thin' pages in results – any page you want to rank – should have all the things Google is looking for. That's a lot these days!

- It is important you spread all that real ‘PageRank’ – or link equity – to your sales keyword / phrase rich sales pages, and as much remains to the rest of the site pages, so Google does not ‘demote’ pages into oblivion – or ‘supplemental results’ as we old timers knew them back in the day. Again – this is slightly old school – but it gets me by, even today.
- Consider linking to important pages on your site from your home page, and other important pages on your site.
- Focus on RELEVANCE first. Then, focus your marketing efforts and get REPUTABLE. This is the key to ranking ‘legitimately’ in Google in 2016.
- Every few months Google changes its algorithm to punish sloppy optimisation or industrial manipulation. Google Panda and Google Penguin are two such updates, but the important thing is to understand Google changes its algorithms constantly to control its listings pages (over 600 changes a year we are told).
- The art of rank modification is to rank without tripping these algorithms or getting flagged by a human reviewer – and that is tricky!
- Focus on improving website download speeds at all times. The web is changing very fast, and [a fast website is a good user experience](#).

Welcome to the *tightrope* that is modern web optimisation.

Read on if you would like to learn how to SEO....

Keyword Research is ESSENTIAL

The first step in any professional campaign is to do some keyword research and analysis.



Somebody asked me about this a simple white hat tactic and I think what is probably the simplest thing anyone can do that guarantees results.

The chart above (from last year) illustrates a reasonably valuable 4-word term I noticed a page I had didn't rank high in Google for, but I thought probably should and could rank for, with this simple technique.

I thought it as simple as an example to illustrate an aspect of onpage SEO or 'rank modification', that's white hat, 100% Google friendly and never, ever going to cause you a problem with Google.

This 'trick' works with any keyword phrase, on any site, with obvious differing results based on availability of competing pages in SERPs, and availability of content on your site.

The keyword phrase I am testing rankings for isn't ON the page, and I did NOT add the key phrase.... or in incoming links, or using any technical tricks like redirects or any hidden technique, but as you can see from the chart, rankings seem to be going in the right direction.

You can profit from it if you know a little about how Google works (or seems to work, in many observations, over years, excluding when Google throws you a bone on synonyms. You can't ever be 100% certain you know how Google works on any level, unless it's data showing you're wrong, of course.)

What did I do to rank number 1 from nowhere for that key phrase?

I added **one keyword** to the page in plain text because adding the actual ‘keyword phrase’ itself would have made my text read a bit keyword stuffed for other variations of the main term. It gets interesting if you do that to a lot of pages, and a lot of keyword phrases. The important thing is keyword research – and knowing which unique keywords to add.

This illustrates a key to ‘relevance’ is.... a keyword.

The right keyword.

Yes – plenty of other things can be happening at the same time. It’s hard to identify EXACTLY why Google ranks pages all the time...but you can COUNT on other things happening and just get on with what you can see works for you.

In a time of **light optimisation**, it’s useful to EARN a few terms you SHOULD rank for in simple ways that leave others wondering how you got it.

Of course, you can still keyword stuff a page, or still spam your link profile – but it is ‘light’ optimisation I am genuinely interested in testing on this site – how to get more with less – I think that’s the key to not tripping Google’s aggressive algorithms.

There are many tools on the web to help with basic keyword research (including the Google Keyword Planner [tool](#) and there are **even more useful third party [SEO tools](#)** to help you do this).

You can use many keyword research tools to identify quickly opportunities to get more traffic to a page:

Hobo Webmaster Tools v1.0.5.5
http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/link-building-strategy-for-beginners-a-month-of-free-tips/ - link building | linkbuilding

TO DO LIST | AUDIT | **KEYWORDS** | PAGE L R RQ | CRAWL

Auto Suggest | Keywords by Cost | Page Rankings | Domain Rankings | **Keyword Ideas** | Page Copy Advice

Adwords Report

Most commonly used keywords

Building (159)	Link (159)	Seo (20)	Linkbuilding (23)	Services (11)
Best (10)	Service (8)	Free (7)	Strategies (6)	Software (5)
Company (5)	Sites (4)	Tool (4)	How (4)	Strategy (3)
Top (3)	List (3)	Directory (3)	What (3)	Backlink (3)

Google Adwords Keyword Opportunities

This data is based on Primary & Secondary Keyword Intelligence within the UK.

DOWNLOAD CSV

Keyword	Search Volume
link building	14000
linkbuilding	8900
link building service	4400
link building services	3600
seo link building	2400
link building strategies	1600
link building software	1500
link building company	1300
backlink building	1300
link building packages	1000
what is link building	1000
link building tools	720
link building seo	720
seo link building service	720
free link building software	720
seo link building software	720
link building techniques	590
manual link building	480
link building campaign	480
free link building	480
link building strategy	480
broken link building	480

Google Analytics Keyword 'Not Provided'

Google Analytics was the very best place to look at keyword opportunity for some (especially older) sites, but that all changed a few years back.

Google **stopped telling us which keywords are sending traffic to our sites from the search engine back in October 2011**, as part of privacy concerns for its users.

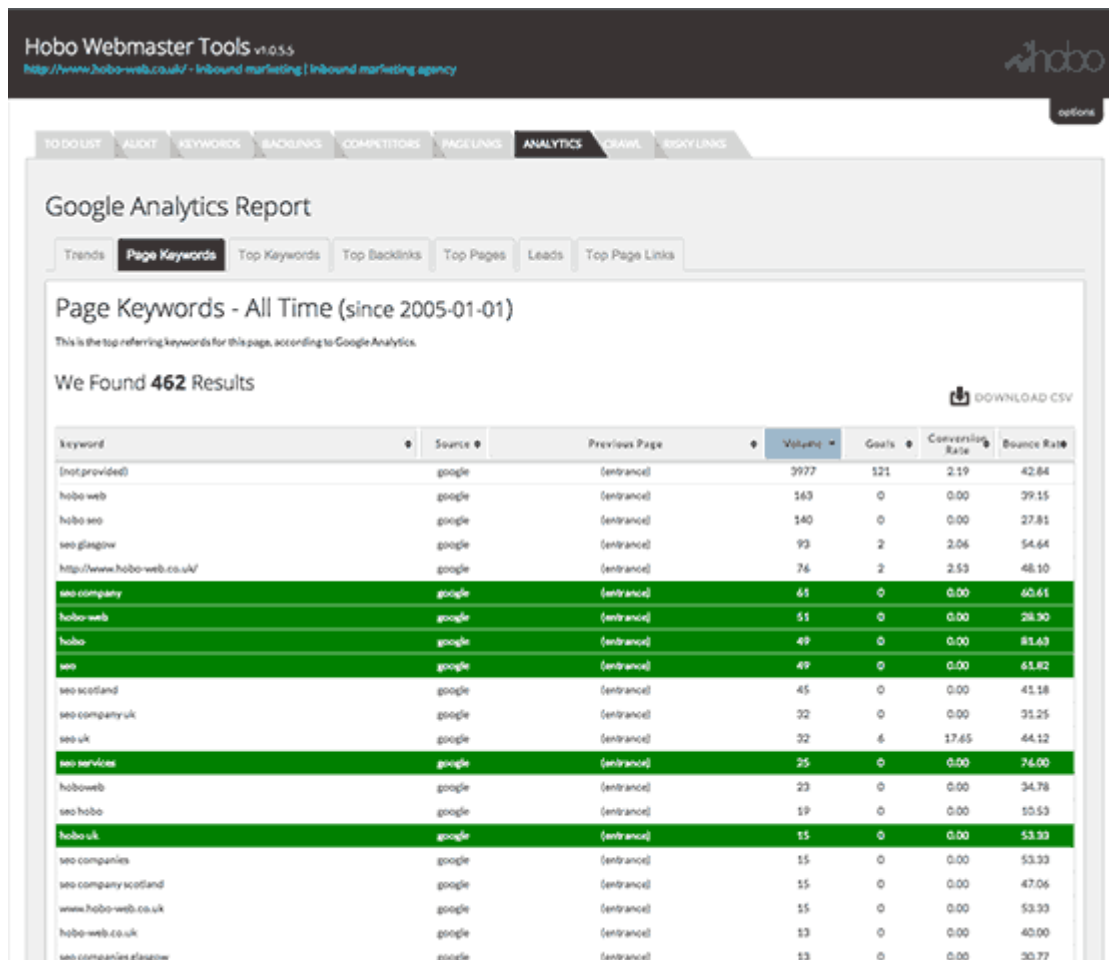
Google will now begin encrypting searches that people do by default, if they are logged into Google.com already through a secure connection. The change to SSL search also means that sites people visit after clicking on results at Google will no longer receive "referrer" data that reveals what those people searched for, except in the case of ads.

Google Analytics now instead displays – keyword “**not provided**“, instead.

In Google’s new system, referrer data will be blocked. This means site owners will begin to lose valuable data that they depend on, to understand how their sites are found through Google. They’ll still be able to tell that someone came from a Google search. They won’t, however, know what that search was. [SearchEngineLand](#)

You can still get *some* of this data if you sign up for **Google Webmaster Tools** (and you can combine this in Google Analytics) but the data even there is limited and often not entirely the most accurate. The keyword data can be useful, though – and access to backlink data is essential these days.

If the website you are working on is an aged site – there’s probably a wealth of keyword data in Google Analytics:



keyword	Source	Previous Page	Volume	Goals	Conversion Rate	Bounce Rate
(not provided)	google	(entrance)	3977	121	2.19	42.84
hobo-web	google	(entrance)	163	0	0.00	39.15
hobo seo	google	(entrance)	140	0	0.00	27.81
seo glasgow	google	(entrance)	93	2	2.06	54.64
http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/	google	(entrance)	76	2	2.53	48.10
seo company	google	(entrance)	61	0	0.00	40.61
hobo-web	google	(entrance)	51	0	0.00	28.30
hobo	google	(entrance)	49	0	0.00	81.60
seo	google	(entrance)	49	0	0.00	61.82
seo scotland	google	(entrance)	45	0	0.00	41.18
seo company uk	google	(entrance)	32	0	0.00	35.25
seo uk	google	(entrance)	32	6	17.65	44.12
seo services	google	(entrance)	25	0	0.00	74.00
hoboweb	google	(entrance)	23	0	0.00	34.78
seo hobo	google	(entrance)	19	0	0.00	55.53
hobo-uk	google	(entrance)	15	0	0.00	53.33
seo companies	google	(entrance)	15	0	0.00	53.33
seo company scotland	google	(entrance)	15	0	0.00	47.06
www.hobo-web.co.uk	google	(entrance)	15	0	0.00	53.33
hobo-web.co.uk	google	(entrance)	13	0	0.00	40.00
seo companies glasgow	google	(entrance)	13	0	0.00	30.77

This is another example of Google making ranking in organic listings HARDER – a change for ‘users’ that seems to have the most impact on ‘marketers’ outside of Google’s ecosystem – yes – search engine optimisers.

Now, consultants need to be page-centric (abstract, I know), instead of just keyword centric when optimising a web page for Google. There are now plenty of third party tools that help when researching keywords but most of us miss the kind of keyword intelligence we used to have access to.

Proper keyword research is important because getting a site to the top of Google eventually comes down to your text content on a page and keywords in external & internal links. Altogether, Google uses these signals to determine where you rank if you rank at all.

There's no magic bullet, to this.

At any one time, your site is probably feeling the influence of some algorithmic filter (for example, [Google Panda](#) or [Google Penguin](#)) designed to keep spam sites under control and deliver relevant, high-quality results to human visitors.

One filter may be kicking in keeping a page down in the SERPs while another filter is pushing another page up. You might have poor content but excellent incoming links, or vice versa. You might have very good content, but a very poor technical organisation of it.

Try and identify the reasons Google doesn't 'rate' a particular page higher than the competition – the answer is usually on the page or in backlinks pointing to the page.

- Do you have too few quality inbound links?
- Do you have too many low quality backlinks?
- Does your page lack descriptive keyword rich text?
- Are you keyword stuffing your text?
- Do you link out to unrelated sites?
- Do you have too many advertisements above the fold?
- Do you have affiliate links on every page of your site, and text found on other websites?
- Do you have broken links and missing images on the page?

Whatever they are, identify issues and fix them.

Get on the wrong side of Google and your site might well be selected for MANUAL review – so **optimise your site as if, one day, you will get that website review from a Google Web Spam reviewer.**

The key to a successful campaign, I think, is persuading Google that your page is most relevant to any given search query. You do this by good unique keyword rich text content and getting “quality” links to that page.

The latter is far easier to say these days than actually do!

Next time you are developing a page, consider what looks spammy to you is probably spammy to Google. Ask yourself which pages on your site are really necessary. Which links

are necessary? Which pages on the site are emphasised in the site architecture? Which pages would you ignore?

You can help a site along in any number of ways (including making sure your page titles and meta tags are unique) but be careful. Obvious evidence of ‘rank modifying’ is dangerous.

I prefer simple SEO techniques and ones that can be measured in some way. I have never *just* wanted to **rank for competitive terms**; I have always wanted to understand at least some of the reasons why a page ranked for these key phrases. I try to create a good user experience for humans AND search engines. If you make high-quality text content relevant and suitable for both these audiences, you’ll more than likely find success in organic listings and you might not ever need to get into the technical side of things, like redirects and [search engine friendly URLs](#).

To beat the competition in an industry where it’s difficult to attract quality links, you have to get more “technical” sometimes – and in some industries – you’ve traditionally needed to be 100% black hat to even get in the top 100 results of competitive, transactional searches.

There are no hard and fast rules to long term ranking success, other than developing quality websites with quality content and quality links pointing to it. The less domain authority you have, the more text you’re going to need. The aim is to build a satisfying website and build real authority!

You need to mix it up and learn from experience. Make mistakes and learn from them by observation. I’ve found getting penalised is a very good way to learn what not to do.

Remember there are exceptions to nearly every rule, and in an ever fluctuating landscape, and you probably have little chance determining exactly *why* you rank in search engines these days. I’ve been doing it for over 15 years and every day I’m trying to better understand Google, to learn more and learn from others’ experiences.

It’s important not to obsess about granular ranking specifics that have little return on your investment unless you really have the time to do so! THERE IS USUALLY SOMETHING MORE VALUABLE TO SPEND THAT TIME ON.

That’s usually either good backlinks or great content.

Fundamentals

The fundamentals of successful optimisation while refined have not changed much over the years – although Google does seem a LOT better than it was at rewarding pages with some reputation signals and satisfying content / usability.

Google isn't lying about rewarding legitimate effort – despite what some claim. If they were, I would be a black hat full time. So would everybody else trying to rank in Google.

The majority of small to medium businesses do not need advanced strategies because their direct competition has not employed these tactics either.

I took a medium sized business to the top of Google recently for very competitive terms doing nothing but ensuring page titles were optimised, the home page text was re-written, one or two earned links from trusted sites.

This site was a couple of years old, a clean record in Google, and a couple of organic links already from trusted sites.

This domain had the authority and capability to rank for some valuable terms, and all we had to do was to make a few changes on the site, improve the depth and focus of website content, monitor keyword performance and tweak page titles.

There was a little [duplicate content](#) needing sorting out and a bit of canonicalisation of thin content to resolve, but **none** of the measures I implemented I'd call advanced.

A lot of businesses can get more converting visitors from Google simply by following basic principles and best practices:

1. Always making sure that every page in the site links out to at least one other page in the site
2. Link to your important pages often
3. Link not only from your navigation, but from keyword rich text links in text content – keep this natural and for visitors
4. Try to keep each page element and content unique as possible
5. Build a site for visitors to get visitors and you just might convert some to actual sales too
6. Create keyword considered content on the site people will link to
7. Watch which sites you link to and from what pages, but do link out!
8. Go and find some places on relatively trusted sites to try and get some anchor text rich inbound links
9. Monitor trends, check stats
10. Minimise duplicate or thin content
11. Bend a rule or two without breaking them and you'll probably be ok

.... Once this is complete it's time to ... add more, and better content to your site and tell more people about it, if you want more Google love.

OK, so you might have to implement the odd 301, but again, it's hardly *advanced*.

I've seen simple SEO marketing techniques working for years.

You are better off doing simple stuff better and faster than worrying about some of the more 'advanced' techniques you read on some blogs I think – it's more productive, cost effective for businesses and safer, for most.

Beware Pseudoscience

Pseudoscience is a claim, belief, or practice posing as science, but which does not constitute or adhere to an appropriate scientific methodology...

Beware folk trying to bamboozle you with science. This isn't a science when Google controls the 'laws' and changes them at will.

You see I have always thought that optimisation was about:

- Looking at Google rankings all night long,
- Keyword research
- Observations about ranking performance of your pages and that of others (though not in a controlled environment)
- Putting relevant, co-occurring words you want to rank for on pages
- Putting words in links to pages you want to rank for
- Understanding what you put in your title, that's what you are going to rank best for
- Getting links from other websites pointing to yours
- Getting real quality links that will last from sites that are pretty trustworthy
- Publishing lots and lots of content
- Focusing on the long tail of search!!!
- Understanding it will take time to beat all this competition

I always expected to get a site demoted, by:

- Getting too many links with the same anchor text pointing to a page
- Keyword stuffing a page
- Trying to manipulate Google too much on a site
- Creating a "frustrating user experience."
- Chasing the algorithm too much
- Getting links I shouldn't have
- Buying links

Not that any of the above is automatically penalised all the time.

I was always of the mind I don't need to understand the maths or science of Google, that much, to understand what Google engineers want.

The biggest challenge these days are to get trusted sites to link to you, but the rewards are worth it.

To do it, you probably should be investing in some marketable content, or compelling benefits for the linking party (that's not just paying for links somebody else can pay more for). Buying links to improve rankings WORKS but it is probably THE most hated link building technique as far as the Google Web spam team is concerned.

I was very curious about the science of optimisation I studied what I could but it left me a little unsatisfied. I learned that **building links**, creating **lots of decent content** and learning **how to monetise that content better** (while not breaking any major TOS of Google) would have been a more worthwhile use of my time.

Getting better and faster at doing all that would be nice too.

There are many problems with blogs, too, including mine.

Misinformation is an obvious one. Rarely are your results conclusive or observations 100% accurate. Even if you think a theory holds water on some level. I try to update old posts with new information if I think the page is only valuable with accurate data.

Just remember most of what you read about how Google works from a third party is OPINION and just like in every other sphere of knowledge, 'facts' can change with a greater understanding over time or with a different perspective.

Chasing The Algorithm



There is no magic bullet and there are no secret formulas to achieve fast number 1 ranking in Google in any competitive niche WITHOUT spamming Google.

A legitimately earned high position in search engines in 2016 takes a lot of hard work.

There are a few less talked about tricks and tactics that are deployed by some better than others to combat Google Panda, for instance, but there are no big secrets (no “white hat” secrets anyway). There is clever strategy, though, and creative solutions to be found to exploit opportunities uncovered by researching the niche. As soon as Google sees a strategy that gets results... it usually becomes ‘out with the guidelines’ and something you can be penalised for – so **beware jumping on the latest fad**.

The biggest advantage any one provider has over another is experience and resource. The knowledge of what doesn’t work and what will hurt your site is often more valuable than knowing what will give you a short-lived boost. Getting to the top of Google is a relatively simple process. One that is constantly in change. Professional SEO is more a collection of skills, methods and techniques. It is more a way of doing things, than a one-size-fits-all magic trick.

After over a decade practising and deploying real campaigns, I’m still trying to get it down to its simplest, most cost-effective processes.

I think it’s about doing simple stuff right.

Good text, simple navigation structure, quality links. To be relevant and reputable takes time, effort and luck, just like anything else in the real world, and that is the way Google want it.

If a company is promising you guaranteed rankings and has a magic bullet strategy, watch out.

I'd check it didn't contravene Google's guidelines.

How long does it take to see results?

Some results can be gained within weeks and you need to expect some strategies to take months to see the benefit. **Google WANTS these efforts to take time.** Critics of the search engine giant would point to Google wanting fast effective rankings to be a feature of Google's own Adwords sponsored listings.

Optimisation is not a quick process, and a successful campaign can be judged on months if not years. Most successful, fast ranking website optimisation techniques end up finding their way into Google Webmaster Guidelines – so be wary.

It takes time to build quality, and it's this *quality* that Google aims to reward in 2016.

It takes time to generate the data needed to begin to formulate a campaign, and time to deploy that campaign. Progress also depends on many factors

- How old is your site compared to the top 10 sites?
- How many back-links do you have compared to them?
- How is their quality of back-links compared to yours?
- What the history of people linking to you (what words have people been using to link to your site?)
- How good of a resource is your site?
- Can your site attract natural back-links (e.g. you have good content or a great service) or are you 100% relying on your agency for back-links (which is very risky in 2016)?
- How much unique content do you have?
- Do you have to pay everyone to link to you (which is risky), or do you have a “natural” reason people might link to you?

Google wants to return quality pages in its organic listings, and it takes time to build this quality and for that quality to be recognised.

It takes time too to balance your content, generate quality backlinks and manage your disavowed links.

Google knows how valuable organic traffic is – and they want webmasters investing a LOT of effort in ranking pages.

Critics will point out the higher the cost of expert SEO, the better-looking Adwords becomes, but Adwords will only get more expensive, too. At some point, if you want to compete online, you're going to HAVE to build a quality website, with a unique offering to satisfy returning visitors – the sooner you start, the sooner you'll start to see results.

If you start NOW and are determined to build an online brand, a website rich in content with a satisfying user experience – Google will reward you in organic listings.

ROI

Web optimisation is a marketing channel just like any other and there are no guarantees of success in any, for what should be obvious reasons. There are no guarantees in Google Adwords either, except that costs to compete will go up, of course.

That's why it is so attractive – but like all marketing – it is still a gamble.

At the moment, I don't know you, your business, your website, your resources, your competition or your product. Even with all that knowledge, calculating ROI is extremely difficult because ultimately Google decides on who ranks where in its results – sometimes that's ranking better sites, and sometimes (often) it is ranking sites breaking the rules above yours.

Nothing is absolute in search marketing.

There are no guarantees – despite claims from some companies. What you make from this investment is dependent on many things, not least, how suited your website is to convert visitors to sales.

Every site is different.

Big Brand campaigns are far, far different from small business SEO campaigns that don't have any links to begin with, to give you but one example.

It's certainly easier if the brand in question has a lot of domain authority just waiting to be unlocked – but of course, that's a generalisation as big brands have big brand competition too.

It depends entirely on the quality of the site in question and the level and quality of the competition, but smaller businesses should probably look to own their niche, even if limited to their location, at first.

Local SEO is always a good place to start for small businesses.

Page Title Tag Best Practice

The page title tag (or HTML Title Element) is arguably the most important on page ranking factor (with regards to web page optimisation). Keywords in page titles can undeniably HELP your pages rank higher in Google results pages (SERPs). The page title is also often used by Google as the title of a search snippet link in search engine results pages.

For me, a perfect title tag in Google is dependant on a number of factors and I will lay down a couple below but I have since expanded page title advice on another page ([link below](#));

1. A page title that is **highly relevant** to the page it refers to will maximise its usability, search engine ranking performance and click through satisfaction rate. It will probably be displayed in a web browsers window title bar, and in clickable search snippet links used by Google, Bing & other search engines. The title element is the “crown” of a web page with important *keyword phrase* featuring, AT LEAST, ONCE within it.
2. Most modern search engines have traditionally placed a lot of importance in the words contained within this HTML element. **A good page title is made up of valuable keyword phrases with clear user intent.**
3. The last time I looked Google displayed as many characters as it can fit into “a block element that’s 512px wide and doesn’t exceed 1 line of text”. So – **THERE BECAME NO AMOUNT OF CHARACTERS any optimiser could lay down as exact best practice to GUARANTEE a title will display, in full in Google, at least, as the search snippet title. Ultimately – only the characters and words you use will determine if your entire page title will be seen in a Google search snippet.** Recently Google displayed 70 characters in a title – but that changed in 2011/2012.
4. If you want to **ENSURE your FULL title tag shows in the desktop UK version of Google SERPs**, stick to a shorter title of about **55 characters** but that does not mean your title tag MUST end at 55 characters and remember your mobile visitors see a longer title (in the UK, in March 2015 at least). I have seen ‘up-to’ 69 characters (back in 2012) – but as I said – what you see displayed in SERPs depends on the characters you use. In 2016 – I just expect what Google displays to change – so I don’t obsess about what Google is doing in terms of display.
5. Google is all about ‘user experience’ and ‘visitor satisfaction’ in 2016 so it’s worth remembering that usability studies have shown that a good page title length is about **seven or eight words long and fewer than 64 total characters**. Longer titles are less scan able in bookmark lists, and might not display correctly in many browsers (and of course probably will be truncated in SERPs).
6. Google **will INDEX perhaps 1000s of characters** in a title... but I don’t think no one knows exactly how many characters or words Google will count AS a TITLE when determining relevance for ranking purposes. It is a very hard thing to try to isolate accurately with all the testing and obfuscation Google uses to hide its ‘*secret sauce*’. I

have had ranking success with longer titles – much longer titles. Google *certainly* reads ALL the words in your page title (unless you are spamming it silly, of course).

7. You can **probably include up to 12 words that will be counted as part of a page title**, and consider using your important keywords in the first eight words. The rest of your page title will be counted as normal text on the page.
8. NOTE, in 2016, the **HTML title element you choose for your page, may not be what Google chooses to include in your SERP snippet**. The search snippet title and description are very much *QUERY dependant* these days. Google often chooses what it *thinks* is the most relevant title for your search snippet, and it can use information from your page, or in links to that page, to create a very different SERP snippet title.
9. When optimising a title, you are looking to rank for as many terms as possible, without keyword stuffing your title. Often, the best bet is to optimise for a particular phrase (or phrases) – and take a more long-tail approach. Note that too many page titles and not enough actual page text per page could lead to Google Panda or other ‘user experience’ performance issues. **A highly relevant unique page title is no longer enough to float a page with thin content**. Google cares WAY too much about the page text content these days to let a good title hold up a thin page on most sites.
10. Some page titles do better with a call to action – a call to action which reflects exactly a searcher’s *intent* (e.g. to learn something, or buy something, or hire something. Remember this is your *hook* in search engines if Google chooses to use your page title in its search snippet, and there are a lot of competing pages out there in 2016.
11. The perfect title tag on a page is *unique* to other pages on the site. In light of Google Panda, an algorithm that looks for a ‘quality’ in sites, you REALLY need to make your page titles UNIQUE, and minimise any duplication, especially on larger sites.
12. I like to make sure my keywords feature as early as possible in a title tag but the important thing is to have important keywords and key phrases in your page title tag SOMEWHERE.
13. For me, when improved search engine visibility is more important than branding, the company name goes at the end of the tag, and I use a variety of dividers to separate as no one way performs best. If you have a recognisable brand – then there is an argument for putting this at the front of titles – although Google often will change your title dynamically – sometimes putting your brand at the front of your snippet link title itself.
14. Note that Google is pretty good these days at removing any special characters you have in your page title – and I would be wary of trying to make your title or Meta Description STAND OUT using special characters. That is not what Google wants, evidently, and they do give you a further chance to make your search snippet stand out with RICH SNIPPETS and SCHEMA mark-up.
15. I like to think I write titles for search engines AND humans.

16. Know that Google tweaks everything regularly – why not what the perfect title keys off?
So MIX it up...
17. Don't obsess. Natural is probably better, and will only get *better* as engines evolve. I optimise for key-phrases, rather than just keywords.
18. I prefer mixed case page titles as I find them more scan able than titles with ALL CAPS or all lowercase.
19. Generally speaking, the more domain trust/authority your SITE has in Google, the easier it is for a new page to rank for something. So bear that in mind. There is only so much you can do with your page titles – your websites rankings in Google are a LOT more to do with OFFSITE factors than ONSITE ones – negative and positive.
20. Click through rate is something that is likely measured by Google when ranking pages (Bing say they use it too, and they now power Yahoo), so it is worth considering whether you are best optimising your page titles for click-through rate or optimising for more search engine rankings.
21. I would imagine keyword stuffing your page titles could be one area Google look at (although I see little evidence of it).
22. Remember....think '*keyword phrase*' rather than '*keyword*', '*keyword*', '*keyword*'... think Long Tail.
23. Google will select the best title it wants for your search snippet – and it will take that information from multiple sources, NOT just your page title element. A small title is often appended with more information about the domain. Sometimes, if Google is confident in the BRAND name, it will replace it with that (often adding it to the beginning of your title with a colon, or sometimes appending the end of your snippet title with the actual domain address the page belongs to).

A Note About Title Tags;

When you write a page title, you have a chance right at the beginning of the page to tell Google (and other search engines) if this is a spam site or a quality site – such as – have you repeated the keyword four times or only once? I think title tags, like everything else, should probably be as simple as possible, with the keyword once and perhaps a related term if possible.

I always aim to keep my HTML page title elements simple and as unique as possible.

I'm certainly cleaning up the way I write my titles all the time.

More Reading:

- [Title Tags Best Practice](#)
- [Google Will Use H1,H2,H3,H4,H5 & H6 Headers As Titles](#)

External Links

- <http://www.w3.org/QA/Tips/good-titles.html>
- <http://moz.com/learn/SEO/title-tag>
- http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_title.asp
- <http://searchengineland.com/writing-HTML-title-tags-humans-google-bing-59384>
- <http://searchenginewatch.com/sew/news/2054494/title-tag-copywriting-tips-newbie-SEOs>

Meta Keywords Best Practice

A hallmark of shady natural search engine optimisation companies – the meta-keywords tag. Companies that waste time and resources on these items waste client's money – that's a fact:

```
<meta name="Keywords" content="s.e.o., search engine optimisation, optimization">
```

I have one piece of advice with the Meta keyword tag, which like the [title tag](#), goes in the head section of your web page, **forget about them**.

If you are relying on meta-keyword optimisation to rank for terms, your dead in the water. From what I see, Google + Bing ignores meta keywords – or, at least, places no weight in them to rank pages. Yahoo may read them, but really, a search engine optimiser has more important things to worry about than this nonsense.

What about other search engines that use them? Hang on while I submit my site to those 75,000 engines first [sarcasm!]. Yes, ten years ago early search engines liked looking at your meta-keywords. I've seen OPs in forums ponder which is the best way to write these tags – with commas, with spaces, limiting to how many characters. Forget about meta-keyword tags – they are a pointless waste of time and bandwidth. Could probably save a rain forest with the bandwidth costs we save if everybody removed their keyword tags.

Tin Foil Hat Time

So you have a new site.... You fill your home page meta tags with the 20 keywords you want to rank for – hey, that's what optimisation is all about, isn't it? You've just told Google by the third line of text what to filter you for. The meta name="Keywords" was actually originally for words that weren't actually on the page that would help classify the document.

Sometimes competitors might use the information in your keywords to determine what you are trying to rank for, too....

If everybody removed them and stopped abusing meta keywords, Google would probably start looking at them but that's the way of things in search engines.

I ignore meta keywords and remove them from pages I work on.

Meta Description Best Practice

Like the [title element](#) and unlike the [meta keywords tag](#), this one is important, both from a human and search engine perspective.

Forget whether or not to put your keyword in it, make it relevant to a searcher and write it for humans, not search engines. If you want to have this 20-word snippet which accurately describes the page you have optimised for one or two keyword phrases when people use Google to search, make sure the keyword is in there.

I must say, I normally do include the keyword in the description as this usually gets it in your SERP snippet.

Google looks at the description but there is debate whether it uses the description tag to rank sites. I think they might be at some level, but again, a very weak signal. I certainly don't know of an example that clearly shows a meta description helping a page rank.

Sometimes, I will ask a question with my titles, and answer it in the description, sometimes I will just give a hint;

[What's The Best Keyword Meta Tags Formula? | Hobo](#)

2 Jul 2008 ... I wouldn't waste 2 minutes optimising my **keyword meta** tags for search engines.

www.hobo-web.co.uk/seo-blog/index.php/keyword-meta-tags/ - 40 minutes ago -

[Similar pages](#)

That is a lot more difficult in 2016 as search snippets change depending on what Google wants to emphasise to its users.

It's also very important to have **unique meta descriptions** on every page on your site.

Tin Foil Hat Time

Sometimes I think if your titles are spammy, your keywords are spammy, and your meta description is spammy, Google might stop right there – even they probably will want to save bandwidth at some time. Putting a keyword in the description won't take a crap site to number 1 or raise you 50 spots in a competitive niche – so why optimise for a search engine when you can optimise for a human? – I think that is much more valuable, especially if you are in the mix already – that is – on page one for your keyword.

So, the meta description tag is important in Google, Yahoo and Bing and every other engine listing – very important to get it right.

Make it for humans.

Oh, and by the way – Google seems to truncate anything over @156 characters in the meta description, although this may be limited by pixel width in 2016.

More Reading:

- <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/definitive-guide-to-using-important-meta-tags/>

External Links

- <https://support.google.com/webmasters/?hl=en#topic=3309469>

Robots Meta Tag

Thus far I've theorised about the [Title Element](#), the [Meta Description Tag and Meta Keywords Tag](#). Next:

The Robots Meta Tag;

```
<meta name="robots" content="index, nofollow" />
```

I could use the above meta tag to tell Google to *index* the page but not to *follow* any links on the page, if for some reason, I did not want the page to appear in Google search results.

By default, Googlebot will index a page and follow links to it. So there's no need to tag pages with content values of INDEX or FOLLOW. **GOOGLE**

There are various instructions you can make use of in your Robots Meta Tag, but remember Google by default WILL index and follow links, so you have NO need to include that as a command – **you can leave the robots meta out completely – and probably should if you don't have a clue.**

Googlebot understands any combination of lowercase and uppercase. **GOOGLE.**

Valid values for Robots Meta Tag "CONTENT" attribute are: "INDEX", "NOINDEX", "FOLLOW", and "NOFOLLOW". Pretty self-explanatory.

Examples:

- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOINDEX, FOLLOW"
- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="INDEX, NOFOLLOW"
- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW"
- META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOARCHIVE"
- META NAME="GOOGLEBOT" CONTENT="NOSNIPPET"

Google will understand the following and interprets the following robots meta tag values:

- NOINDEX – prevents the page from being included in the index.
- NOFOLLOW – prevents Googlebot from following any links on the page. (Note that this is different from the link-level NOFOLLOW attribute, which prevents Googlebot from following an individual link.)
- NOARCHIVE – prevents a cached copy of this page from being available in the search results.
- NOSNIPPET – prevents a description from appearing below the page in the search results, as well as prevents caching of the page.
- NOODP – blocks the Open Directory Project description of the page from being used in the description that appears below the page in the search results.

- NONE – equivalent to “NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW”.

Robots META Tag Quick Reference

Terms	Googlebot	Slurp	BingBot	Teoma
NoIndex	YES	YES	YES	YES
NoFollow	YES	YES	YES	YES
NoArchive	YES	YES	YES	YES
NoSnippet	YES	NO	NO	NO
NoODP	YES	YES	YES	NO
NoYDIR	NO	YES	NO	NO
NoImageIndex	YES	NO	NO	NO
NoTranslate	YES	NO	NO	NO
Unavailable_After	YES	NO	NO	NO

I’ve included the robots meta tag in my tutorial as this IS one of only a few meta tags / HTML head elements I focus on when it comes to managing Googlebot and Bingbot. At a page level – it is a powerful way to control if your pages are returned in search results pages.

These meta tags go in the [HEAD] section of a [HTML] page and represent the only tags for Google I care about. Just about everything else you can put in the [HEAD] of your HTML document is quite unnecessary and maybe even pointless (for Google optimisation, anyway).

If you are interested in using methods like on-page robots instructions and the robots.txt file to control which pages get indexed by Google and how Google treats them, [Sebastian](#) knows a lot more than me.

External Links

- <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.co.uk/2007/03/using-robots-meta-tag.html>
- <http://www.robotstxt.org/meta.html>
- <http://googleblog.blogspot.co.uk/2007/02/robots-exclusion-protocol.html>

H1-H6: Headers

I can't find any definitive proof online that says you need to use Heading Tags (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6) or that they improve rankings in Google, and I have seen pages do well in Google without them – but I do use them, especially the H1 tag on the page.

For me, it's another piece of a 'perfect' page, in the traditional sense, and I try to build a site for Google and humans.

`<h1>This is a page title</h1>`

I still generally **only use one <h1> heading tag** in my keyword targeted pages – I believe this is the way the [W3C](#) intended it to be used in HTML4 – and I ensure they are at the top of a page above relevant page text and written with my main keywords or related keyword phrases incorporated.

I have never experienced any problems using CSS to control the appearance of the heading tags making them larger or smaller.

You can use multiple H1s in HTML5, but most sites I find I work on still use HTML4.

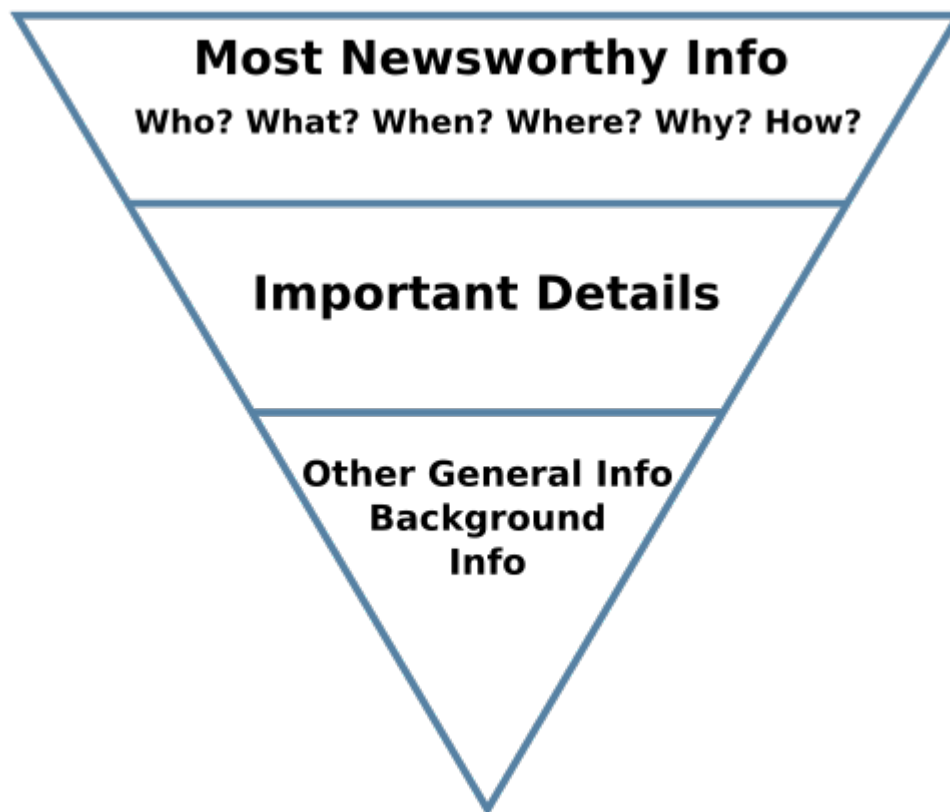
I use as many H2 – H6 as is necessary depending on the size of the page, but I use H1, H2 & H3. You can see here [how to use header tags properly](#) (basically, just be consistent, whatever you do, to give your users the best user experience).

How many words in the H1 Tag? As many as I think is sensible – as short and snappy as possible usually.

I also discovered Google will use your Header tags as page titles at some level if your title element is malformed.

As always be sure to make your heading tags highly relevant to the content on that page and not too spammy, either.

How Many Words & Keywords?



I get asked this all the time –

how much text do you put on a page to rank for a certain keyword?

The answer is there is **no optimal amount of text per page**, but how much text you'll 'need' will be based on your DOMAIN AUTHORITY, your TOPICAL RELEVANCE and how much COMPETITION there is for that term, and HOW COMPETITIVE that competition is.

Instead of thinking about the *quantity* of the text, you should think more about the *quality* of the content on the page. Optimise this with searcher intent in mind. Well, that's how I do it.

I don't find that you need a minimum amount of words or text to rank in Google. I have seen pages with 50 words outrank pages with 100, 250, 500 or 1000 words. Then again I have seen pages with no text rank on nothing but inbound links or other 'strategy'. In 2016, Google is a lot better at hiding away those pages, though.

At the moment, I prefer long form pages with a lot of text although I still rely heavily on keyword analysis to make my pages. The benefits of longer pages are that they are great for long tail key phrases.

Creating deep, information rich pages focuses the mind when it comes to producing authoritative, useful content.

Every site is different. Some pages, for example, can get away with 50 words because of a good link profile and the domain it is hosted on. For me, the important thing is to make a page relevant to a user's search query.

I don't care how many words I achieve this with and often I need to experiment on a site I am unfamiliar with. After a while, you get an idea how much text you need to use to get a page on a certain domain into Google.

One thing to note – the more text you add to the page, as long as it is unique, keyword rich and relevant, the more that page will be rewarded with more visitors from Google.

There is no optimal number of words on a page for placement in Google. Every website – every page – is different from what I can see. Don't worry too much about word count if your content is original and informative. Google will probably reward you on some level – at some point – if there is lots of unique text on all your pages.

TIP: The '*inverted pyramid*' – pictured above – is useful when creating pages for the web too – very useful.

- [Character Counter Tool](#)

Keyword Density?

The short answer to this is – **no**.

There is no one-size-fits-all keyword density, **no** optimal percentage guaranteed to rank any page at number 1. However, I do know you can keyword stuff a page and trip a spam filter.

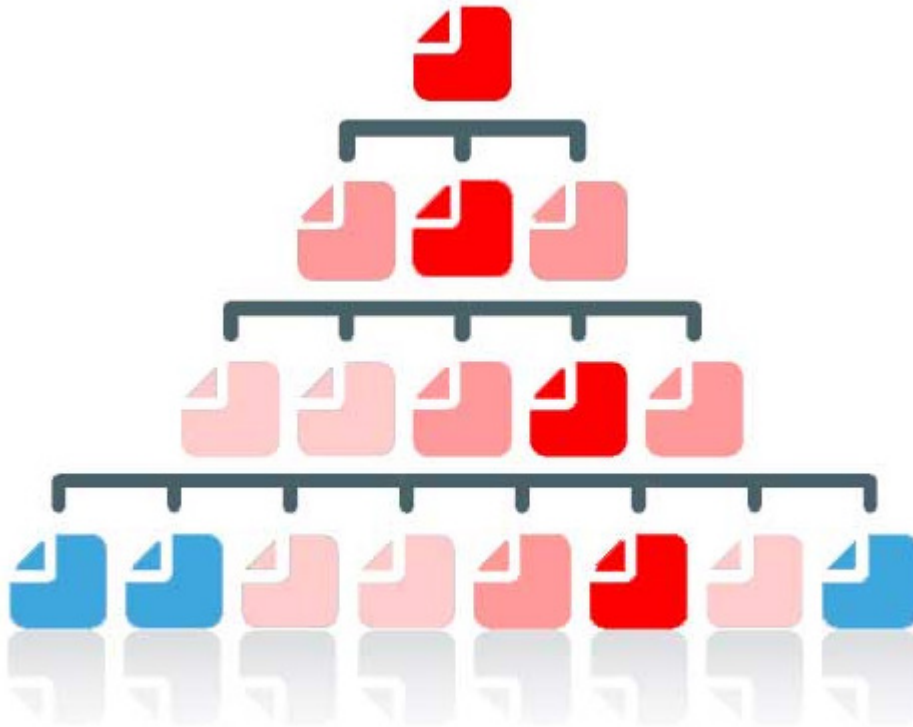
Most web optimisation professionals agree there is no ideal percent of keywords in text to get a page to number 1 in Google. Search engines are not that easy to fool, although the key to success in many fields doing simple things well (or, at least, better than the competition).

I write natural page copy where possible always focused on the key terms – I never calculate density to identify the best % – there are way too many other things to work on. I have looked into this. If it looks natural, it's ok with me.

Normally I will try and get related terms in the page, and if I have five paragraphs, I might have the keyword in 4 or 5 of those as long as it doesn't look like I stuffed them in there.

[Optimal keyword density](#) is a myth, although there are many who would argue otherwise.

Internal Links To Relevant Pages



I [link to relevant internal pages](#) in my site when necessary.

I silo any relevance or trust mainly via links in text content and secondary menu systems and between pages that are relevant in context to one another.

I don't worry about perfect silo'ing techniques anymore, and don't worry about whether or not I should link to one category from another as I think the 'boost' many proclaim is minimal on the size of sites I usually manage.

I do not obsess about site architecture as much as I used to.... but I always ensure my pages I want to be indexed are all available from a crawl from the home page – and I still emphasise important pages by linking to them where relevant. I always aim to get THE most important exact match anchor text pointing to the page from internal links – but I avoid abusing internals and avoid overtly manipulative internal links that are not grammatically correct, for instance..

There's no set method I find works for every site, other than to **link to related internal pages often without overdoing it** and where appropriate.

What Are SERP Sitelinks?

When Google knows enough about the history or relationships of a website (or web page), it will sometimes display what are called site links (or mega site links) under the url of the website in question.

This results in an enhanced search snippet in SERPs.

This is normally triggered when Google is confident this is the site you are looking for, based on the search terms you used.

Sitelinks are usually reserved for navigational queries with a heavy brand bias, a brand name or a company name, for instance, or the website address.

I've tracked the evolution of Google site links in organic listings over the years, and they are seemingly picked based on a number of factors.

How To Get Google Sitelinks?

Pages that feature in site links are often popular pages on your site, in terms of internal or external links, or user experience or even recent posts that may have been published on your blog.

Google likes to seem to mix this up a lot, perhaps to offer some variety, and probably to obfuscate results to minimise or discourage manipulation.

Sometimes it returns pages that leave me scratching my head as to why Google selected a particular page appears.

If you don't HAVE site links, have a bit of patience and focus on other areas of your web marketing, like adding more content, get some PR or social activity focussed on the site.

Google WILL give you site links on some terms; ONCE Google is confident your site is the destination users want.

That could be a week or months, but the more popular the site is, the more likely Google will catch up fast.

Sitelinks are not something can be switched on or off, although you can control to some degree the pages are selected as site links. You can do that in Google Webmaster Tools AKA Search Console.

Link Out To Related Sites

Concerning on-page SEO best practices, I usually link out to other quality relevant pages on other websites where possible and where a human would find it valuable.

I don't link out to other sites from the homepage. I want all the PR residing in the home page to be shared only with my internal pages. **I don't link out to other sites from my category pages either**, for the same reason.

I link to other relevant sites (a deep link where possible) **from individual pages** and I do it often, usually. I don't worry about link equity or PR leak because I control it on a page-to-page level.

This works for me, it allows me to share the link equity I have with other sites while ensuring it is not at the expense of pages on my domain. It may even help get me into a ['neighbourhood' of relevant sites](#), especially when some of those start linking back to my site.

Linking out to other sites, especially using a blog, also helps tell others that might be interested in your content that your page is 'here'. Try it.

I don't abuse anchor text, but I will be considerate, and usually try and link out to a site using keywords these bloggers / site owners would appreciate.

The recently leaked Quality Raters Guidelines document clearly tells web reviewers to identify how USEFUL or helpful your SUPPLEMENTARY NAVIGATION options are – whether you link to other internal pages or pages on other sites.

Redirect Non-WWW To WWW

Your site probably has canonicalisation issues (especially if you have an e-commerce website) and it might start at the domain level.

Simply put, <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/> can be treated by Google as a different URL than <http://hobo-web.co.uk/> even though it's the same page, and it can get even more complicated.

Its thought REAL Pagerank can be diluted if Google gets confused about your URLs and speaking simply you don't want this PR diluted (in theory).

That's why many, including myself, redirect non-www to www (or vice versa) if the site is on a Linux/Apache server (in the htaccess file –

Options +FollowSymLinks

RewriteEngine on

RewriteCond %{HTTP_HOST} ^hobo-web.co.uk [NC]

RewriteRule ^(.*)\$ http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/\$1 [L,R=301]

Basically, you are redirecting all the Google juice to one canonical version of a URL.

In 2016 – this is a MUST HAVE best practice.

It keeps it simple when optimising for Google. It should be noted; it's **incredibly important not to mix the two types of www/non-www on site when linking your internal pages!**

Note in 2016 Google asks you which domain you prefer to set as your canonical domain in Google Webmaster Tools.

Alt Tags

NOTE: Alt Tags are counted by Google (and Bing), but I would be careful *over-optimizing* them. I've seen a lot of websites penalised for over-optimising invisible elements on a page. Don't do it.

ALT tags are very important and I think a very rewarding area to get right. I always put the main keyword in an ALT once when addressing a page.

Don't optimise your ALT tags (or rather, attributes) JUST for Google!

Use ALT tags (or rather, ALT Attributes) for descriptive text that helps visitors – and keep them unique where possible, like you do with your titles and meta descriptions.

Don't obsess. Don't optimise your ALT tags just for Google – do it for humans, accessibility and usability. If you are interested, I conducted a simple test using ALT attributes to determine [how many words I could use in IMAGE ALT text that Google would pick up](#).

And remember – even if, like me most days, you can't be bothered with all the image ALT tags on your page, at least, use a blank ALT (or NULL value) so people with screen readers can enjoy your page.

Update 17/11/08 – Picked This Up At SERoundtable [about Alt Tags](#):

JohnMu from Google: **alt attribute** should be used to describe the image. So if you have an image of a big blue pineapple chair you should use the alt tag that best describes it, which is alt="big blue pineapple chair." **title attribute** should be used when the image is a hyperlink to a specific page. The title attribute should contain information about what will happen when you click on the image. For example, if the image will get larger, it should read something like, title="View a larger version of the big blue pineapple chair image."

Barry continues with a quote:

As the Googlebot does not see the images directly, we generally concentrate on the information provided in the "alt" attribute. Feel free to supplement the "alt" attribute with "title" and other attributes if they provide value to your users! So for example, if you have an image of a puppy (these seem popular at the moment) playing with a ball, you could use something like "My puppy Betsy playing with a bowling ball" as the alt-attribute for the image. If you also have a link around the image, pointing a large version of the same photo, you could use "View this image in high-resolution" as the title attribute for the link.

Search Engine Friendly URLs (SEF)

Clean URLs (or search engine friendly URLs) are just that – clean, easy to read, simple.

You do not need clean URLs in site architecture for Google to spider a site successfully (confirmed by Google in 2008), although I do use clean URLs as a default these days, and have done so for years.

It's often more usable.

Is there a massive difference in Google when you use clean URLs?

No, in my experience it's very much a second or third order affect, perhaps even less, **if used on its own**. However – there it is demonstrable benefit to having keywords in URLs.

The thinking is that you might get a boost in Google SERPs if your URLs are clean – because you are using keywords in the actual page name instead of a parameter or session ID number (which Google often struggles with).

I think Google might reward the page some sort of relevance because of the actual file / page name. I optimise as if they do.

It is virtually impossible to isolate any ranking factor with a degree of certainty.

Where any benefit **is slightly detectable** is when people (say in forums) **link to your site with the URL as the link**.

Then it is fair to say you do get a boost because keywords are in the actual anchor text link to your site, and I believe this is the case, but again, that depends on the quality of the page linking to your site. That is, if Google trusts it and it passes Pagerank (!) and anchor text benefit.

And of course, you'll need citable content on that site of yours.

Sometimes I will remove the stop-words from a URL and leave the important keywords as the page title because a lot of forums garble a URL to shorten it. Most forums will be nofollowed in 2016, to be fair, but some old habits die-hard.

Sometimes I prefer to see the exact phrase I am targeting as the name of the URL I am asking Google to rank.

I configure URLs the following way;

1. www.hobo-web.co.uk/?p=292 — is automatically changed by the CMS using URL rewrite to
2. www.hobo-web.co.uk/websites-clean-search-engine-friendly-URLs/ — which I then break down to something like
3. www.hobo-web.co.uk/search-engine-friendly-URLs/

It should be remembered it is thought although Googlebot can crawl sites with dynamic URLs; it is assumed by many webmasters there is a greater risk that it will give up if the URLs are deemed not important and contain multiple variables and session IDs (theory).

As standard, I use clean URLs where possible on new sites these days, and try to keep the URLs as simple as possible and do not obsess about it.

That's my aim at all times when I optimise a website to work better in Google – simplicity.

Google does look at keywords in the URL even in a granular level.

Having a keyword in your URL might be the difference between your site ranking and not – potentially useful to take advantage of long tail search queries – for more see [Does Google Count A Keyword In The URI \(Filename\) When Ranking A Page?](#)

Keywords In Bold Or Italic

As I mentioned in my [ALT Tags](#) section, some webmasters claim **putting your keywords in bold** or *putting your keywords in italics* is a beneficial ranking factor in terms of search engine optimizing a page.

It is essentially impossible to test this, and I think these days, Google could well be using this (and other easy to identify on page optimisation efforts) to identify what to *punish* a site for, not *promote* it in SERPs.

Any item you can ‘optimise’ on your page – Google can use this against you to filter you out of results.

I use bold or italics these days specifically for users.

I only use emphasis if it’s *natural* or **this is really what I want to emphasise!**

Do not tell Google what to filter you for that easily.

I think Google treats websites they trust far different to others in some respect.

That is, more trusted sites might get treated differently than untrusted sites.

Keep it simple, natural, useful and random.

Absolute Or Relative URLs

My advice would be to keep it consistent whatever you decide to use.

I prefer absolute URLs. That's just a preference. Google will crawl either if the local setup is correctly developed.

- What is an absolute URL? Example – <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/search-engine-optimisation/>
- What is a relative URL? Example – </search-engine-optimisation.htm>

Relative just means relative to the document the link is on.

Move that page to another site and it won't work.

With an absolute URL, it would work.

Subfolders or Files For URLs

Sometimes I use subfolders and sometimes I use files. I have not been able to decide if there is any real benefit (in terms of ranking boost) to using either. A lot of CMS these days use subfolders in their file path, so I am pretty confident Google can deal with either.

I used to prefer files like **.html** when I was building a new site from scratch, as they were the 'end of the line' for search engines, as I imagined it, and a subfolder (or directory) was a *collection* of pages.

I used to think it could take more to get a subfolder trusted than say an individual file and I guess this sways me to use files on most websites I created (back in the day). Once subfolders are trusted, it's 6 or half a dozen, what the actual difference is in terms of ranking in Google – usually, rankings in Google are more determined by how RELEVANT or REPUTABLE a page is to a query.

In the past, subfolders could be treated differently than files (in my experience).

Subfolders can be trusted less than other subfolders or pages in your site, or ignored entirely. Subfolders *used to seem to me* to take a *little* longer to get indexed by Google, than for instance **.html** pages.

People talk about trusted domains but they don't mention (or don't think) some parts of the domain can be *trusted less*. Google treats some subfolders..... differently. Well, they used to – and remembering how Google *used* to handle things has some benefits – even in 2016.

Some say don't go beyond four levels of folders in your file path. I haven't experienced too many issues, but you never know.

UPDATED – I think in 2016 it's even less of something to worry about. There's so much more important elements to check.

Which Is Better For Google? PHP, HTML or ASP?

Google doesn't care. As long as it renders as a browser compatible document, it appears Google can read it these days.

I prefer PHP these days even with flat documents as it is easier to add server side code to that document if I want to add some sort of function to the site.

Does W3C Valid HTML / CSS Help?

Does Google rank a page higher because of valid code? The short answer is no, even though I tested it on a [small-scale test](#) with different results.

Google doesn't care if your page is valid HTML and valid CSS. This is clear – check any top ten results in Google and you will probably see that most contain invalid HTML or CSS. I love creating accessible websites but they are a bit of a pain to manage when you have multiple authors or developers on a site.

If your site is so badly designed with a lot of invalid code even Google and browsers cannot read it, then you have a problem.

Where possible, if commissioning a new website, demand, at least, minimum [web accessibility](#) compliance on a site (there are three levels of priority to meet), and aim for valid HTML and CSS. Actually, this is the law in some countries although you would not know it, and be prepared to put a bit of work in to keep your rating.

Valid HTML and CSS are a pillar of best practice website optimisation, not strictly a part of professional search engine optimisation. It is one form of optimisation Google will not penalise you for.

Addition – I usually still aim to follow W3C recommendations that help deliver a better user experience;

Hypertext links. Use text that makes sense when read out of context. W3C Top Ten Accessibility Tips

301 Old Pages

Rather than tell Google via a 404 or some other command that this page isn't here anymore, consider permanently redirecting a page to a relatively similar page to pool any link equity that page might have.

My general rule of thumb is to make sure the information (and keywords) are contained in the new page – stay on the safe side.

Most already know the power of a [301 redirect](#) and how you can use it to power even totally unrelated pages to the top of Google for a time – sometimes a very long time.

Google seems to think server side redirects are OK – so I use them.

You can change the focus of a redirect but that's a bit black hat for me and can be abused – I don't talk about that sort of thing on this blog. But it's worth knowing – you need to keep these redirects in place in your htaccess file.

Redirecting multiple old pages to one new page – works for me, if the information is there on the new page that ranked the old page.

NOTE – This tactic is being heavily spammed in 2016. Be careful with redirects. I think I have seen penalties transferred via 301s. I also WOULDN'T REDIRECT 301s blindly to your home page. I'd also be careful of redirecting lots of low-quality links to one URL. If you need a page to redirect old URLs to, consider your sitemap or contact page. Audit any pages backlinks BEFORE you redirect them to an important page.

I'm seeing CANONICALS work just the same as 301s in 2016 – though they seem to take a little longer to have an impact.

Hint – a good tactic at the moment is to **CONSOLIDATE old, thin under-performing articles Google ignores, into bigger, better quality articles.**

I usually then 301 all the pages to a single source to consolidate link equity and content equity. As long as the intention is to serve users and create something more up-to-date – Google is fine with this.

Duplicate Content

Webmasters are often confused about getting penalised for duplicate content, which is a natural part of the web landscape, especially at a time when Google claims there is NO duplicate content penalty.

The reality in 2016 is that if Google classifies your duplicate content as THIN content, then you DO have a very serious problem that violates Google's website performance recommendations and this 'violation' will need 'cleaned' up.

Duplicate content generally refers to substantive blocks of content within or across domains that either completely match other content or are appreciably similar. Mostly, this is not deceptive in origin.....

It's very important to understand that if, in 2016, as a webmaster you republish posts, press releases, news stories or product descriptions found on other sites, then your pages are very definitely going to struggle to gain in traction in Google's SERPs (search engine results pages).

Google doesn't like using the word 'penalty' but if your entire site is made of entirely of republished content – Google does not want to rank it.

If you have a multiple site strategy selling the same products – you are probably going to cannibalise your traffic in the long run, rather than dominate a niche, as you used to be able to do.

This is all down to how the search engine deals with duplicate content found on other sites – and the experience Google aims to deliver for its users – and its competitors.

Mess up with duplicate content on a website, and it might look like a Google penalty as the end-result is the same; important pages that once ranked might not rank again – and new content might not get crawled as fast as a result.

Your website might even get a 'manual action' for thin content. Worse case scenario your website is hit by the GOOGLE PANDA algorithm.

A good rule of thumb is; do *NOT* expect to rank high in Google with content found on other, more trusted sites, and don't expect to rank at all if all you are using is automatically generated pages with no 'value add'.

Tip: Do NOT REPEAT text, even your own, across too many pages on your website.

More Reading:

- [Which Pages On Your Site Hurt Or Help Your Rankings?](#)
- [Algorithm Change Causes Ranking Drop](#)
- [Duplicate content advice from Google](#)

Broken Links Are A Waste Of Link Power

The simplest piece of advice I ever read about creating a website / optimising a website was years ago and it is still useful today:

make sure all your pages link to at least one other in your site

This advice is still sound today and the most important piece of advice out there in my opinion.

[Check your pages for broken links](#). Seriously, broken links are a waste of link power and could hurt your site, drastically in some cases.

Google is a link-based search engine – if your links are broken and your site is chock full of 404s you might not be at the races.

Here's the second best piece of advice, in my opinion, seeing as we are just about talking about website architecture;

link to your important pages often internally, with varying anchor text in the navigation and in page text content

Especially if you do not have a lot of Pagerank.

Do I Need A Google XML Sitemap For My Website?

What is an XML sitemap and do I need one to SEO my site for Google?

(The XML Sitemap protocol) has wide adoption, including support from Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft

No. You do NOT, technically, *need* an XML Sitemap to optimise a site for Google if you have a sensible navigation system that Google can crawl and index easily.

HOWEVER – in 2016 – you should have a Content Management System that produces one as a best practice – and you should submit that sitemap to Google in Google Webmaster Tools. Again – best practice.

Google has said very recently XML and RSS are still a very useful discovery method for them to pick out recently updated content on your site.

An XML Sitemap is a file on your server with which you can help Google easily crawl & index all the pages on your site. This is evidently useful for very large sites that publish lots of new content or updates content regularly.

Your web pages will still get into search results without an XML sitemap if Google can find them by crawling your website if you:

1. Make sure all your pages link to at least one other in your site
2. Link to your important pages often, with (varying anchor text, in the navigation and **in page text content if you want best results**)

Remember – Google needs links to find all the pages on your site, and links spread Pagerank, that help pages rank – so an XML sitemap is not quite a substitute for a great website architecture.

[Sitemaps](#) are an easy way for webmasters to inform search engines about pages on their sites that are available for crawling. In its simplest form, a Sitemap is an XML file that lists URLs for a site along with additional metadata about each URL (when it was last updated, how often it usually changes, and how important it is, **relative to other URLs in the site**) so that search engines can more intelligently crawl the site.

Most modern CMS auto-generate XML sitemaps and [Google does ask you submit a site-map in webmaster tools](#), and I do these days.

I prefer to define manually my important pages by links and depth of content, but an XML sitemap is a best practice in 2016 for most sites.

Does Only The First Link Count In Google?

Does the second anchor text link on a page count?

One of the more interesting discussions in the webmaster community of late has been trying to determine which links Google counts as links on pages on your site. Some say the link Google finds higher in the code, is the link Google will ‘count’ if there are two links on a page going to the same page.

I tested this (a while ago now) with the post [Google counts The First Internal Link](#).

For example (and I am talking internally here – if you took a page and I placed two links on it, both going to the same page? (OK – hardly scientific, but you should get the idea).

Will Google only ‘count’ the first link? Or will it read the anchor text of both links, and give my page the benefit of the text in both links especially if the anchor text is different in both links? Will Google ignore the second link?

What is interesting to me is that knowing this leaves you with a question. If your navigation array has your main pages linked to in it, perhaps your links in content are being ignored, or at least, not valued.

I think links in body text are invaluable. Does that mean placing the navigation below the copy to get a wide and varied internal anchor text to a page?

Perhaps.

As I said, I think this is one of the more interesting talks in the community at the moment and perhaps Google works differently with internal links as opposed to external; links to other websites.

I think quite possibly this could change day to day if Google pressed a button, but **I optimise a site thinking that only the first link on a page will count** – based on what I monitor although I am testing this – and actually, I usually only link once from page to page on client sites, unless it’s useful for visitors.

Canonical Tag – Canonical Link Element Best Practice

When it comes to Google SEO, the **rel=canonical link element** has become ***VERY* IMPORTANT** over the years and NEVER MORE SO.

This element is employed by Google, Bing and other search engines to help them specify the page you want to rank out of duplicate and near duplicate pages found on your site, or on other pages on the web.

In the video above, Matt Cutts from Google shares tips on the new rel=”canonical” tag (more accurately – the *canonical link element*) that the 3 top search engines now support.

Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft have all agreed to work together in a

“joint effort to help reduce duplicate content for larger, more complex sites, and the result is the new Canonical Tag”.

Example Canonical Tag From Google Webmaster Central blog:

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://www.example.com/product.php?item=swedish-fish" />
```

The process is simple. You can put this link tag in the head section of the duplicate content URLs if you think you need it.

I add a self-referring canonical link element as standard these days – to ANY web page.

Is rel=”canonical” a hint or a directive?

It’s a hint that we honor strongly. We’ll take your preference into account, in conjunction with other signals, when calculating the most relevant page to display in search results.

Can I use a relative path to specify the canonical, such as <link rel=”canonical” href=”product.php?item=swedish-fish” />?

Yes, relative paths are recognized as expected with the <link> tag. Also, if you include a <base> link in your document, relative paths will resolve according to the base URL.

Is it okay if the canonical is not an exact duplicate of the content?

We allow slight differences, e.g., in the sort order of a table of products. We also recognize that we may crawl the canonical and the duplicate pages at different points in time, so we may occasionally see different versions of your content. All of that is okay with us.

What if the rel=”canonical” returns a 404?

We’ll continue to index your content and use a heuristic to find a canonical, but we recommend that you specify existent URLs as canonicals.

What if the rel="canonical" hasn't yet been indexed?

Like all public content on the web, we strive to discover and crawl a designated canonical URL quickly. As soon as we index it, we'll immediately reconsider the rel="canonical" hint.

Can rel="canonical" be a redirect?

Yes, you can specify a URL that redirects as a canonical URL. Google will then process the redirect as usual and try to index it.

What if I have contradictory rel="canonical" designations?

Our algorithm is lenient: We can follow canonical chains, but we strongly recommend that you update links to point to a single canonical page to ensure optimal canonicalization results.

Can this link tag be used to suggest a canonical URL on a completely different domain?

****Update on 12/17/2009: The answer is yes! We now support a [cross-domain rel="canonical"](#) link element.****

More reading at <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/specify-your-canonical.html>

Is Domain Age An Important Google Ranking Factor

No, not in isolation.

Having a ten-year-old domain that *Google knows nothing about* is the same as having a brand new domain.

A 10-year-old site that's constantly cited by, year on year, the actions of other, more authoritative, and trusted sites? That's valuable.

But that's not the age of your website address ON IT'S OWN in-play as a ranking factor.

A one-year-old domain cited by authority sites is just as valuable if not more valuable than a ten-year-old domain with no links and no search performance history.

Perhaps **Domain age may come into play when other factors** are considered – but I think Google works very much like this on all levels, with all 'ranking factors', and all ranking 'conditions'. I don't think you can consider discovering 'ranking factors' without 'ranking conditions'.

Other Ranking Factors:

1. **Domain age;** (NOT ON IT'S OWN)
2. **Length of site domain registration;** (I don't see much benefit ON IT'S OWN even knowing "Valuable (legitimate) domains are often paid for several years in advance, while doorway (illegitimate) domains rarely are used for more than a year.") – paying for a domain in advance just tells others you don't want anyone else using this domain name, it is no indication you're going to do something Google will reward you for limo).
3. **Domain registration information was hidden/anonymous;** (possibly, under human review if OTHER CONDITIONS are met like looking like a spam site)
4. Site top level domain (geographical focus, e.g. *.com* versus *.co.uk*); **(YES)**
5. Site top level domain (e.g. *.com* versus *.info*); **(DEPENDS)**
6. Sub domain or root domain? **(DEPENDS)**
7. Domain past records (how often it changed IP); **(DEPENDS)**
8. Domain past owners (how often the owner was changed) **(DEPENDS)**
9. Keywords in the domain; **(DEFINITELY – ESPECIALLY EXACT KEYWORD MATCH**
– *although Google has a lot of filters that mute the performance of an exact match domain in 2016*))
10. Domain IP; **(DEPENDS – for most, no)**
11. Domain IP neighbours; **(DEPENDS – for most, no)**
12. Domain external mentions (non-linked) **(I Don't think so)**
13. Geo-targeting settings in Google Webmaster Tools **(YES – of course)**

Rich Snippets

Rich Snippets and **Schema Mark-up** can be intimidating if you are new to them – but important data about your business can be very simply added to your site by sensible optimisation of any website footer.

This is easy to implement.

An optimised website footer can comply with law, may help search engines and can help usability and improve conversions.

Properly optimised your website footer can also help you make your search snippet stand out in Google results pages:

Professional Website SEO Audit Services | Website Quality ...

www.hobo-web.co.uk/seo-audit/ ▼

★★★★★ Rating: 4.8 - 6 reviews

5 Mar 2015 - Get a professional **seo audit** for your website. Let me share with you 15 years experience of helping small businesses succeed online.

If you are a business in the UK – your website needs to meet the legal requirements necessary to comply with the **UK Companies Act 2007**. It's easy just to incorporate this required information into your footer.

Companies in the UK must include certain regulatory information on their websites and in their email footers or they will breach the Companies Act and risk a fine. OUTLAW

Here's what you need to know regarding website and email footers to comply with the UK Companies Act (with our information in **bold**);

-
1. The Company Name –
Hobo Web
 2. Physical geographic address (A P.O. Box is unlikely to suffice as a geographic address; but a registered office address would – If the business is a company, the registered office address must be included.)
**Hobo-Web LTD,
The Stables,
24 Patrick Street,
Greenock
PA16 8NB**

Scotland UK

3. the company's registration number should be given and, under the Companies Act, the place of registration should be stated (e.g.
Hobo Web Limited is a company registered in Scotland with company number SC299002
4. email address of the company (It is not sufficient to include a 'contact us' form without also providing an email address and geographic address somewhere easily accessible on the site)
info@hobo-web.co.uk
5. The name of the organisation with which the customer is contracting must be given. This might differ from the trading name. Any such difference should be explained
hobo-web.co.uk is the trading name / style of Hobo Web Limited.
6. If your business has a VAT number, it should be stated even if the website is not being used for e-commerce transactions.
VAT No. 880 5135 26
7. Prices on the website must be clear and unambiguous. Also, state whether prices are inclusive of tax and delivery costs.
All Hobo Web prices stated in email or on the website EXCLUDE VAT

The above information **does not need** to feature on every page, more on a clearly accessible page. However – with Google Quality Raters rating web pages on quality based on Expertise, Authority and Trust (see my recent [making high-quality websites](#) post) – ANY signal you can send to an algorithm or human reviewer's eyes that you are a legitimate business is probably a sensible move at this time (if you have nothing to hide, of course).

Note: If the business is a member of a trade or professional association, membership details, including any registration number, should be provided. Consider also the Distance Selling Regulations, which contain other information requirements for online businesses that sell to consumers (B2C, as opposed to B2B, sales).

For more detailed information about the UK Companies:

- [Companies Act 2006](#) (HTML version)
- [The Companies \(Registrar, Languages and Trading Disclosures\) Regulations 2006](#)
- [Companies Act](#) (760-page / 2.8MB PDF)
- [The UK's E-commerce Regulations](#) – OUT-LAW's excellent guide

Although we display most if not all of this information on email and website footers, I thought it would be handy to gather this information clearly on one page and explain why it's there – and wrap it all up in a (hopefully) informative post.

Dynamic PHP Copyright Notice in WordPress

Now that your site complies with the Act – you'll want to ensure your website never looks obviously out of date.

While you are editing your footer – ensure your copyright notice is dynamic and will change year to year – automatically.

It's simple to display a dynamic date in your footer in WordPress, for instance, so you never need to change your copyright notice on your blog when the year changes.

This little bit of code will display the current year. Just add it in your theme's footer.php and you can forget about making sure you don't look stupid or give the impression your site is out of date and unused, at the beginning of every year.

© Copyright 2004 - <?php echo date("Y") ?>

A simple and elegant PHP copyright notice for WordPress blogs.

Adding Schema.org Markup to Your Footer

You can take your information you have from above and transform it with Schema.org markup to give even more accurate information to search engines.

From this....

```
<div>
  <p> © Copyright 2006-2015 Hobo-Web LTD, Company No. SC299002 | VAT No. 880
  5135 26 <br>
  The Stables, 24 Patrick Street, Greenock, PA16 8NB, Scotland, UK | TEL: 0845 094 0839
  | FAX: 0845 868 8946<br>
  Business hours are 09.00 a.m. to 17.00 p.m. Monday to Friday - Local Time is <span
  id="time">9:44:36</span> (GMT)
  </p>
</div>
```

...to this.

```
<div>
  <div itemscope="" itemtype="http://schema.org/LocalBusiness">
    © Copyright 2006-2015 <span itemprop="name">Hobo-Web LTD</span>
    <div itemprop="address" itemscope="" itemtype="http://schema.org/PostalAddress">
      ADDRESS:
        <span itemprop="streetAddress">24 Patrick Street</span>,
        <span itemprop="addressLocality">Greenock</span>,
        <span itemprop="addressRegion">Scotland</span>,
        <span itemprop="postalCode">PA16 8NB</span>,
        <span itemprop="addressCountry">GB</span> |
        TEL: <span itemprop="telephone">0845 094 0839</span> |
        FAX: <span itemprop="faxNumber">0845 868 8946</span> |
        EMAIL: <a href="mailto:info@hobo-web.co.uk" itemprop="email">info@hobo-
web.co.uk</a>.
    </div>
  </div>
```

```
<span itemprop="geo" itemscope="" itemtype="http://schema.org/GeoCoordinates">
  <meta itemprop="latitude" content="55.9520367">
  <meta itemprop="longitude" content="-4.7667952">
</span>
```

```
<span>Company No. SC299002</span> |
VAT No.<span itemprop="vatID">880 5135 26</span> |
Business hours are <time itemprop="openingHours" datetime="Mo,Tu,We,Th,Fr 09:00-
17:00">09.00 a.m. to 17.00 p.m. Monday to Friday</time>
Local Time is <span id="time">9:46:20</span> (GMT)
```

```
</div>

<span class="rating-desc" itemscope="" itemtype="http://schema.org/Product">
  <span itemprop="name">Hobo Web SEO Services</span>
  <span itemprop="aggregateRating" itemscope=""
itemtype="http://schema.org/AggregateRating"> Rated <span
itemprop="ratingValue">4.8</span> / 5 based on <span itemprop="reviewCount">6</span>
reviews. | <a class="ratings"
href="https://plus.google.com/b/113802450121722957804/113802450121722957804/about/p
/pub?review=1">Review Us</a> </span>
</span>
</div>
```

Tip: Note the code near the end of the above example, if you are wondering **how to get yellow star ratings in Google results pages**.

I got yellow stars in Google **within a few days of adding the code to my website template** – directly linking my site to information Google already has about my business.

Also – you can modify that link to plus.google.com to **link directly to your REVIEWS page on Google Plus** to encourage people to review your business.

Now you can have a website footer that helps your business comply with UK Law, is more usable, automatically updates the copyright notice year – **and** helps your website stick out in Google SERPs.

More Reading

- <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/99170?hl=en>

Keep It Simple, Stupid

Don't Build Your Site With Flash or HTML Frames.

Well... not entirely in Flash, and especially not if you know very little about the ever improving accessibility of Flash.

Flash is a propriety plug-in created by Macromedia to infuse (albeit) fantastically rich media for your websites. The W3C advises you avoid the use of such proprietary technology to construct an entire site. Instead, build your site with CSS and HTML ensuring everyone, including search engine robots, can sample your website content. Then, if required, you can embed media files such as Flash in the HTML of your website.

Flash, in the hands of an inexperienced designer, can cause all types of problems at the moment, especially with:

- Accessibility
- Search Engines
- Users not having the Plug-In
- Large Download Times

Flash doesn't even work at all on some devices, like the Apple iPhone. Note that Google sometimes highlights if your site is not mobile friendly on some devices. And on the subject of mobile-friendly websites – note that **Google has alerted the webmaster community that mobile friendliness will be a search engine ranking factor in 2016.**

Starting April 21 (2015), we will be expanding our use of mobile-friendliness as a ranking signal. This change will affect mobile searches in all languages worldwide and will have a significant impact in our search results. Consequently, users will find it easier to get relevant, high-quality search results that are optimized for their devices. GOOGLE

Html5 is the preferred option over Flash these days, for most designers. A site built entirely in Flash could cause an unsatisfactory user experience, and could affect your rankings, and especially in mobile search results. For similar accessibility and user satisfaction reasons, I would also say [don't build a site with website frames](#).

As in any form of design, don't try and re-invent the wheel when simple solutions suffice. The **KISS** philosophy has been around since the dawn of design.

KISS does not mean boring web pages. You can create stunning sites with smashing graphics – but you should build these sites using simple techniques – HTML & CSS, for instance. If you are new to web design, avoid things like Flash and JavaScript, especially for elements

like scrolling news tickers, etc. These elements work fine for TV – but only cause problems for website visitors.

Keep layouts and navigation arrays consistent and simple too. Don't spend time, effort and money (especially if you work in a professional environment) designing fancy navigation menus if, for example, your new website is an information site.

Same with website optimisation – keep your documents well structured and keep your page Title Elements and text content relevant, use Headings tags sensibly and try and avoid leaving too much of a footprint – whatever you are up to.

1. [Google's Mobile-Friendly Test](#)
2. <http://validator.w3.org/mobile/>
3. [Best Screen Size](#)

A Non-Technical Google SEO Strategy

Here are some final thoughts:

- **Use common sense** – Google is a search engine – it is looking for pages to give searchers results, 90% of its users are looking for information. Google itself WANTS the organic results full of information. Almost all websites will link to relevant information content so content rich websites get a lot of links – especially quality links. Google ranks websites with a lot of links (especially quality links) at the top of its search engines so the obvious thing you need to do is **ADD A LOT INFORMATIVE CONTENT TO YOUR WEBSITE.**
- I think ranking in organic listings is a lot about trusted links making trusted pages rank, making trusted links making trusted pages rank and nauseam for various keywords. Some pages can pass trust to another site; some pages cannot. Some links can. Some cannot. Some links are trusted to pass ranking ability to another page. Some are not. **YOU NEED LINKS FROM TRUSTED PAGES IF YOU WANT TO RANK AND AVOID PENALTIES & FILTERS.**
- Google engineers are building an AI – but it's all based on simple human desires to make something happen or indeed to prevent something. You can work with Google engineers or against them. They need to make money for Google but unfortunately for them they need to make the best search engine in the world for us humans as part of the deal. Build a site that takes advantage of this. What is a Google engineer trying to do with an algorithm? I always remember it was an idea first before it was an algorithm. What was that idea? Think like a Google engineer and give Google what it wants. What is Google trying to give its users? Align with *that*. What does Google not want to give its users? Don't look anything like *that*. **THINK LIKE A GOOGLE ENGINEER & BUILD A SITE THEY WANT TO GIVE TOP RANKINGS.**
- *Google is a links-based search engine.* Google doesn't need content to *rank* pages but it needs content to give to *users*. Google needs to find content and it finds content by following links just like you do when clicking on a link. So you need first to make sure you tell the world about your site so other sites link to yours. Don't worry about reciprocating to more powerful sites or even real sites – I think this adds to your domain authority – **which is better to have than ranking for just a few narrow key terms.**
- **Everything has limits. Google has limits.** What are they? How would you go about observing them or even testing, breaking them or benefiting from them or being penalised by them? It's not a lab setting – you can't test much if anything, 100% accurately, but you can hypothesise based on the sensible approach bearing in mind what a Google engineer would do, and what you would do if Google were yours.
- The best way for Google to keep rankings secret ultimately is to have a **randomness** – or, at least, a randomness on the surface, as it is presented to users of Google – to it while keeping somethings **stable** – surely the easiest way for it to prevent a curious optimiser

finding out how it works. Well, I think that. And I think this randomness manifests itself in many ways. What will work for some sites might not necessarily work for your sites – not the same anyway. Perhaps no two sites are the same (the conditions are different for a start for any two sites).

- **Google may play dice with the Google multi-verse** so be aware of that. It uses multiple results and rotates them and serves different results to different machines and browsers even on the same computer. Google results are constantly shifting – some pages rank at the top constantly because they are giving Google what it wants in some areas or they might just have a greater number and diversity of more trusted links than your do.
- **Google has a long memory** when it comes to links and pages and associations for you site – perhaps an infinite memory profile of your site. Perhaps it can forgive but never forget. Perhaps it can forget too, just like us, and so previous penalties or bans can be lifted. I think (depending on the site because Google can work out if you have a blog or an e-commerce site) Google probably also looks at different history versions of particular pages even on single sites **WHAT RELATIONSHIP DO YOU WANT TO HAVE WITH GOOGLE?** Onsite, don't try to fool Google – we're not smart enough. Be squeaky clean on-site and make Google think twice about bumping you for discrepancies in your link profile.
- **Earn Google's trust.** Most of our more lucrative accounts come from referrals from clients who trust us. Before clients told them of us, they didn't know about us. Ok, they might have heard about us from people, in turn, they didn't trust that much. Upon the client's testimonial, the referral now trusts us a lot more. These referrals automatically trust us to some extent. That trust grows when we deliver. The referral now trusts us very much. But it's an uphill struggle from that point on to continue to deliver that trust and earn even more trust because you don't want to dip in trust – it's nice to get even more and more trusted. Google works the same way as this human emotion, and search engines have tried for years to deliver a trusted set of sites based on human desire and searcher intent. **MAKE FRIENDS WITH GOOGLE**
- Don't break Google's trust – if your friend betrays you, depending on what they've done, they've lost trust. Sometimes that trust has been lost altogether. If you do something Google doesn't like manipulate it in a way it doesn't want, you will lose trust, and in some cases, lose all trust (in some areas). For instance, your pages might be able to rank, but your links might not be trusted enough to vouch for another site. **DON'T FALL OUT WITH GOOGLE OVER SOMETHING STUPID**
- **YOU NEED TO MAKE MORE FRIENDS AND ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO ARE FRIENDS WITH GOOGLE.**
- When Google trusts you it's because you've earned its trust to help it carry out what it needs to carry out in the quickest and most profitable way. You've helped Google achieve its goals. It trusts you and it will reward you by listing your contribution in order of the sites it trusts the most. It will list friends it trusts the most who it knows to be educated in a particular area at the top of these areas. **IF GOOGLE TRUSTS YOU IT WILL LET**

**YOUR PAGES RANK AND IN TURN, VOUCH FOR OTHER PAGES, or
'FRIENDS', GOOGLE MIGHT WANT INFORMATION ON.**

- Google is fooled and manipulated just like you can but it will kick you in the gonads if you break this trust – as I probably would. **Treat Google as you would have it treat you.**

**REMEMBER IT TAKES TIME TO BUILD TRUST.... AND THAT IS PROBABLY
ONE OF THE REASONS WHY GOOGLE is pushing 'trust' as a ranking signal.**

I, of course, might be reading far too much into Google, TRUST and the TIME Google wants us to wait for things to happen on their end....but consider trust to be a psychological emotion Google is trying to emulate using algorithms based on human ideas.

If you do all the above, you'll get more and more traffic from Google over time.

If you want to rank for specific keywords in very competitive niches, you'll need to be a big brand, be picked out by big brands (and linked to), or buy links to fake that trust, or get spammy with it in an intelligent way you won't get caught. Easier said, than done.

I suppose Google is open to the con just as any human is if it's based on human traits....

What Not To Do In Website Search Engine Optimisation

Google has a VERY basic organic search engine optimisation [starter guide](#) pdf for webmasters, which they use internally:

Although this guide won't tell you any secrets that'll automatically rank your site first for queries in Google (sorry!), following the best practices outlined below will make it easier for search engines to both crawl and index your content. [Google](#)

It is still worth a read, even if it is VERY basic, best practice search engine optimisation for your site.

No search engine will EVER tell you what actual keywords to put on your site to improve your rankings or get more converting organic traffic – and in Google – that's the SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT thing you want to know!

If you want a bigger pdf – try my [free SEO ebook](#).

It's been downloaded by tens of thousands of webmasters and I update it every year or so.

Here's a list of **what Google tells you to avoid** in the document;

1. choosing a title that has no relation to the content on the page
2. using default or vague titles like "Untitled" or "New Page 1"
3. using a single title tag across all of your site's pages or a large group of pages
4. using extremely lengthy titles that are unhelpful to users
5. stuffing unneeded keywords in your title tags
6. writing a meta description tag that has no relation to the content on the page
7. using generic descriptions like "This is a webpage" or "Page about baseball cards"
8. filling the description with only keywords
9. copy and pasting the entire content of the document into the description meta tag
10. using a single description meta tag across all of your site's pages or a large group of pages
11. using lengthy URLs with unnecessary parameters and session IDs
12. choosing generic page names like "page1.html"
13. using excessive keywords like "baseball-cards-baseball-cards-baseball-cards.htm"
14. having deep nesting of subdirectories like ".../dir1/dir2/dir3/dir4/dir5/dir6/page.html"
15. using directory names that have no relation to the content in them
16. having pages from subdomains and the root directory (e.g. "domain.com/page.htm" and "sub.domain.com/page.htm") access the same content
17. Mixing www. and non-www. versions of URLs in your internal linking structure
18. using odd capitalization of URLs (many users expect lower-case URLs and remember them better)

19. creating complex webs of navigation links, e.g. linking every page on your site to every other page
20. going overboard with slicing and dicing your content (it takes twenty clicks to get to deep content)
21. having a navigation based entirely on drop-down menus, images, or animations (many, but not all, search engines can discover such links on a site, but if a user can reach all pages on a site via normal text links, this will improve the accessibility of your site)
22. letting your HTML sitemap page become out of date with broken links
23. creating an HTML sitemap that simply lists pages without organising them, for example by subject (Edit Shaun – Safe to say especially for larger sites)
24. allowing your 404 pages to be indexed in search engines (make sure that your webserver is configured to give a 404 HTTP status code when non-existent pages are requested)
25. providing only a vague message like “Not found”, “404”, or no 404 page at all
26. using a design for your 404 pages that isn’t consistent with the rest of your site
27. writing sloppy text with many [spelling and grammatical mistakes](#)
28. embedding text in images for textual content (users may want to copy and paste the text and search engines can’t read it)
29. dumping large amounts of text on varying topics onto a page without paragraph, subheading, or layout separation
30. rehashing (or even copying) existing content that will bring little extra value to users

Pretty straightforward stuff but sometimes it’s the simple stuff that often gets overlooked. Of course, you put the above together with Google Guidelines for webmasters.

Search engine optimization is often about making small modifications to parts of your website. When viewed individually, these changes might seem like incremental improvements, but when combined with other optimizations, they could have a noticeable impact on your site’s user experience and performance in organic search results.

Don’t make these simple but dangerous mistakes.....

1. Avoid duplicating content on your site found on other sites. Yes, Google likes content, but it *usually* needs to be well linked to, unique and original to get you to the top!
2. Don’t hide text on your website. Google may eventually remove you from the SERPs.
3. Don’t buy 1000 links and think “that will get me to the top!”. Google likes natural link growth and often frowns on mass link buying.
4. Don’t get everybody to link to you using the same “anchor text” or link phrase. This could flag you as a ‘rank modifier’. You don’t want that.
5. Don’t chase Google PR by chasing 100’s of links. Think quality of links....not quantity.
6. Don’t buy many keyword rich domains, fill them with similar content and link them to your site. This is lazy and dangerous and could see you ignored or worse banned from Google. It might have worked yesterday but it sure does not work today without some grief from Google.
7. Do not constantly change your site pages names or site navigation without remembering to employ redirects. This just screws you up in any search engine.

8. Do not build a site with a JavaScript navigation that Google, Yahoo and Bing cannot crawl.
9. Do not link to everybody who asks you for reciprocal links. Only link out to quality sites you feel can be trusted.

Don't Flag Your Site With Poor Website Optimisation

A primary goal of any 'rank modification' is not to flag your site as 'suspicious' to Google's algorithms or their web spam team.

I would recommend you forget about tricks like links in H1 tags etc. or linking to the same page 3 times with different anchor text on one page.

Forget about 'which is best' when considering things you shouldn't be wasting your time with.

Every element on a page is a benefit to you until you spam it.

Put a keyword in every tag and you will flag your site as 'trying too hard' if you haven't got the link trust to cut it – and Google's algorithms will go to work.

Spamming Google is often counter-productive over the long term.

So:

- Don't spam your anchor text link titles with the same keyword.
- Don't spam your ALT Tags or any other tags either.
- Add your keywords intelligently.
- Try and make the site mostly for humans, not just search engines.

On Page SEO is not as simple as a checklist any more of keyword here, keyword there. Optimisers are up against lots of smart folk at the Googleplex – and they purposely make this practice difficult.

For those who need a checklist, this is the sort of one that gets me results;

1. Do keyword research
2. Identify valuable searcher intent opportunities
3. Identify the audience & the reason for your page
4. Write utilitarian copy – be useful. Use related terms in your content. Use plurals. Use words with searcher intent like buy, compare. I like to get a keyword or related term in every paragraph.
5. Use **emphasis sparingly** to emphasise the important points in the page whether they are your keywords are not
6. Pick an intelligent Page Title with your keyword in it
7. Write an intelligent meta description, repeating it on the page
8. Add an image with user-centric ALT attribute text
9. Link to related pages on your site within the text
10. Link to related pages on other sites
11. Your page should have a simple Google friendly URL

- 12. Keep it simple
- 13. Share it and pimp it

You can forget about *just about* everything else.

What Makes A Page Spam?

What makes a page spam?:

- Hidden text or links – may be exposed by selecting all page text and scrolling to the bottom (all text is highlighted), disabling CSS/Javascript, or viewing source code
- Sneaky redirects – redirecting through several URLs, rotating destination domains cloaking with JavaScript redirects and 100% frame
- Keyword stuffing – no percentage or keyword density given; this is up to the rater
- PPC ads that only serve to make money, not help users
- Copied/scraped content and PPC ads
- Feeds with PPC ads
- Doorway pages – multiple landing pages that all direct user to the same destination
- Templates and other computer-generated pages mass-produced, marked by copied content and/or slight keyword variations
- Copied message boards with no other page content
- Fake search pages with PPC ads
- Fake blogs with PPC ads, identified by copied/scraped or nonsensical spun content
- Thin affiliate sites that only exist to make money, identified by checkout on a different domain, image properties showing origination at another URL, lack of original content, different WhoIs registrants of the two domains in question
- Pure PPC pages with little to no content
- Parked domains

There's more on this announcement at [SEW](#).

If A Page Exists Only To Make Money, The Page Is Spam, to Google

Quote:

If A Page Exists Only To Make Money, The Page Is Spam GOOGLE

In BOTH leaked quality rater guidelines we've seen for Google quality raters this statement is pretty **standout** – and should be a heads up to any webmaster out there who thinks they are going to make a fast buck from Google organic listings these days.

It should, at least, make you think about the types of pages you are going to spend your valuable time making.

Without VALUE ADD for Google's users – don't expect to rank.

If you are making a page today with the sole purpose of making money from it – and especially with **free traffic from Google** – you obviously didn't get the memo.

Consider this from a manual reviewer:

...when they DO *get to the top*, they *have to be reviewed with a human eye* in order to make sure the site has quality. [potpiegirl](#)

It's worth remembering:

- If A Page Exists Only To Make Money, The Page Is Spam
- If A Site Exists Only To Make Money, The Site Is Spam

This is how what you make will be judged – whether it is fair or not.

IS IT ALL BAD NEWS?

Of course not – in some cases – it levels the playing field.

If you come at a website thinking it is going to be a load of work and passion, thinking:

- DIFFERENTIATE YOURSELF
- BE REMARKABLE
- BE ACCESSIBLE
- ADD UNIQUE CONTENT TO YOUR SITE
- GET CREDITED AS THE SOURCE OF UNIQUE CONTENT
- HELP USERS (!) IN A WAY THAT IS NOT ALREADY DONE BY 100 OTHER SITES

.... then you might find you've built a pretty good site and even – a [brand](#).

Google doesn't care about us SEO or websites – but it **DOES** care about **HELPING USERS**.

So, if you are helping your visitors – and not by just getting them to another website – you are probably doing one thing right at least.

With this in mind – I am already building affiliate sites differently.

Doorway Pages

Google has announced they intend to target doorway pages in the next big update. The definition of what a doorway page is sure to evolve over the coming years – and this will start again, soon.

The last time Google announced they were going after doorway pages and doorway sites was back in 2015.

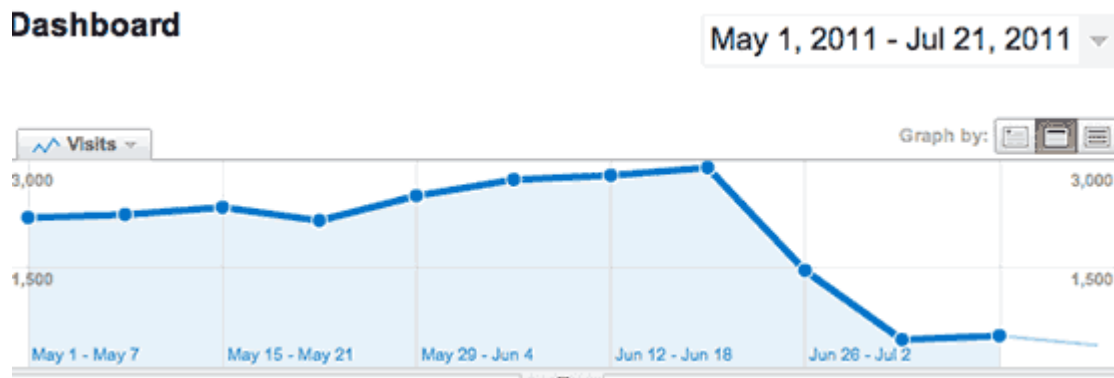
Example: in the images below (from 2011), all pages on the site seemed to be hit with a -50+ penalty for everything.

First – Google **rankings for main terms tanked**....



... which led to a traffic apocalypse of course....

Dashboard



...and they got a nice **email from Google WMT**:

Google Webmaster Tools notice of detected doorway pages on xxxxxxxx – Dear site owner or webmaster of xxxxxxxx, We've detected that some of your site's pages may be

using techniques that are outside Google's Webmaster Guidelines. Specifically, your site may have what we consider to be doorway pages – groups of “cookie cutter” or low-quality pages. Such pages are often of low value to users and are *often optimized for single words or phrases in order to channel users to a single location*. We believe that doorway pages typically create a frustrating user experience, and we encourage you to correct or remove any pages that violate our quality guidelines. Once you've made these changes, please submit your site for reconsideration in Google's search results. If you have any questions about how to resolve this issue, please see our Webmaster Help Forum for support. Sincerely, Google Search Quality Team

What Are Doorway Pages?

Doorway pages are typically large sets of poor-quality pages where each page is optimized for a specific keyword or phrase. In many cases, doorway pages are written to rank for a particular phrase and then funnel users to a single destination. Doorway pages are web pages that are created for spamdexing, this is, for spamming the index of a search engine by inserting results for particular phrases with the purpose of sending visitors to a different page. They are also known as bridge pages, portal pages, jump pages, gateway pages, entry pages and by other names. Doorway pages that redirect visitors without their knowledge use some form of cloaking. Whether deployed across many domains or established within one domain, doorway pages tend to frustrate users, and are in violation of our Webmaster Guidelines. Google's aim is to give our users the most valuable and relevant search results. Therefore, we frown on practices that are designed to manipulate search engines and deceive users by directing them to sites other than the ones they selected, and that provide content solely for the benefit of search engines. Google may take action on doorway sites and other sites making use of these deceptive practice, including removing these sites from the Google index. If your site has been removed from our search results, review our Webmaster Guidelines for more information. Once you've made your changes and are confident that your site no longer violates our guidelines, submit your site for reconsideration.

At the time (2011), I didn't immediately class the pages on the affected sites in question as doorway pages. It's evident Google's definition of a doorways changes over time.

When I looked in Google Webmaster Forums there are plenty of people asking questions about how to fix this, at the time – and as usual – it seems a bit of a grey area with a lot of theories..... and some of the help in the Google forum is, well, clearly questionable.

A lot of people do not realise they are building what Google *classes* as doorway pages..... and it's indicative that what you *intend* to do with the traffic Google sends you may in itself, be a ranking factor not too often talked about.

You probably DO NOT want to register at GWT if you have lots doorway pages across multiple sites.

Here is what Google has said lately about this algorithm update:

Doorways are sites or pages created to rank highly for specific search queries. They are bad for users because they can lead to multiple similar pages in user search results, where each result ends up taking the user to essentially the same destination. They can also lead users to intermediate pages that are not as useful as the final destination.

...with examples of doorway pages listed as follows:

- *Having multiple domain names or pages targeted at specific regions or cities that funnel users to one page*
- *Pages generated to funnel visitors into the actual usable or relevant portion of your site(s)*
- *Substantially similar pages that are closer to search results than a clearly defined, browseable hierarchy*

Google also said recently:

Here are questions to ask of pages that could be seen as doorway pages:

- *Is the purpose to optimize for search engines and funnel visitors into the actual usable or relevant portion of your site, or are they an integral part of your site's user experience?*
- *Are the pages intended to rank on generic terms yet the content presented on the page is very specific?*
- *Do the pages duplicate useful aggregations of items (locations, products, etc.) that already exist on the site for the purpose of capturing more search traffic?*
- *Are these pages made solely for drawing affiliate traffic and sending users along without creating unique value in content or functionality?*
- *Do these pages exist as an "island?" Are they difficult or impossible to navigate to from other parts of your site? Are links to such pages from other pages within the site or network of sites created just for search engines?*

A Real Google Friendly Website

At one time A Google-Friendly website meant a website built so Googlebot could scrape it correctly and rank it accordingly.

When I think ‘Google friendly’ these days – I think a website Google will rank top, if popular and accessible enough, and won’t drop like a f*&^ing stone for no apparent reason one day, even though I followed the Google SEO starter guide to the letter..... just because Google has found something it doesn’t like – or has classified my site as *undesirable* one day.

It is not JUST about original content anymore – it’s about the function your site provides to Google’s visitors – and it’s about your commercial intent.

I am building sites at the moment with the following in mind.....

1. **Don’t be a website Google won’t rank** – What Google classifies your site as – is perhaps the NUMBER 1 Google ranking factor not often talked about – whether it Google determines this algorithmically or eventually, manually. That is – whether it is a MERCHANT, an AFFILIATE, a RESOURCE or DOORWAY PAGE, SPAM, or VITAL to a particular search – what do you think Google thinks about your website? Is your website **better than the ones in the top ten of Google now**? Or just the same? Ask, why should Google bother ranking your website if it is just the same, rather than why it would not because it is just the same.... how can you make yours *different*. Better.
2. Think, that one day, your website will have to pass a **manual review by ‘Google’** – the better rankings you get, or the more traffic you get, the more likely you are to be reviewed. Know that Google, at least classes even useful sites as spammy, according to leaked documents. If you want a site to rank high in Google – it better ‘do’ something other than only link to another site because of a paid commission. Know that to succeed, **your website needs to be USEFUL**, to a visitor that Google will send you – and a useful website is not just a website, with a sole commercial intent, of sending a visitor from Google to another site – or a ‘thin affiliate’ as Google CLASSIFIES it.
3. Think about how Google can algorithmically and manually determine the **commercial intent of your website** – think about the signals that differentiate a real small business website from a website created JUST to send visitors to another website with affiliate links, on every page, for instance; or adverts on your site, above the fold, etc., can be a clear indicator of a webmaster’s particular commercial intent – hence why Google has a Top Heavy Algorithm.
4. Google is NOT going to thank you for publishing lots of similar articles and near **duplicate content on your site** – so EXPECT to have to create original content for every page you want to perform in Google, or at least, not publish content found on other sites....

5. Ensure **Google knows your website is the origin of any content you produce** (typically by simply pinging Google via XML or RSS) – I’d go as far to say think of using Google+ to confirm this too.... this sort of thing will only get more important as the year rolls on
6. Understand and **accept why Google ranks your competition** above you – they are either:
 1. more relevant and more popular,
 2. more relevant and more reputable, or
 3. manipulating backlinks better than you.
 4. spammingUnderstand that everyone at the top of Google falls into those categories and formulate your own strategy to compete – relying on Google to take action on your behalf is VERY probably not going to happen.
7. **Being ‘relevant’** comes down to keywords & key phrases – in domain names, URLs, Title Elements, the number of times they are repeated in text on the page, text in image alt tags, rich mark-up and importantly in keyword links to the page in question. If you are relying on manipulating hidden elements on a page to do well in Google, you’ll probably trigger spam filters. If it is ‘hidden’ in on-page elements – beware relying on it too much to improve your rankings.
8. **The basics of GOOD SEO hasn’t changed for years** – though effectiveness of particular elements has certainly narrowed or changed in type of usefulness – you should still be focusing on building a simple site using VERY simple SEO best practices – **don’t sweat the small stuff, while all-the-time paying attention to the important stuff** – add plenty of unique PAGE TITLES and plenty of new ORIGINAL CONTENT. **Understand how Google SEES your website.** CRAWL it, like Google does, with (for example) Screaming Frog SEO spider, and fix malformed links or things that result in server errors (500), broken links (400+) and unnecessary redirects (300+). Each page you want in Google should serve a 200 OK header message.

...and that’s all for now.

This is a complex topic, as I said at the beginning of this in-depth article.

I hope you enjoyed this free DIY SEO guide for beginners. **DO** keep up to date with [Google Webmaster Guidelines](#).

If you made it to here, you should read my [Google Panda](#) post – which will take your understanding of this process to a higher level.

Making High Quality Google Friendly Websites in 2016

These notes are largely about how to make a high-quality website, dealing with Google Panda and other *quality* updates. They touch on improving user experience (UX) and what you need to know if you are serious about building an effective flagship site that will perform in Google in 2016.

We now have USER EXPERIENCE signals – detected by human and algorithm – to add to the age-old “[CONTENT is | LINKS are | TECHNICAL is] KING!” argument when it comes to ranking high in Google in 2016.

Google is on record that “user experience” itself is not a ranking ‘factor’, but poor UX may still seriously affect how your website performs in Google this year.

Google Quality Rater Guidelines

I spent a lot of time reading through the leaked 2014 and 2015 Google Quality Rater Guidelines when they came out.

I did this as a result of some strange stuff I was seeing going on as I reviewed sites and pages with Panda-like problems to see if the answer to some of this lay in **MACHINE IDENTIFIABLE Google Panda signals**.

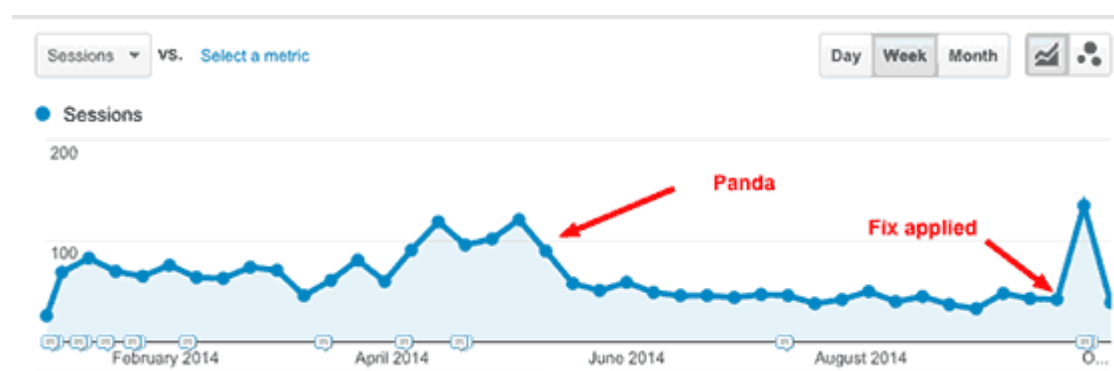


IMAGE: Fixing A User Experience Signal on ONE PAGE led to RECOVERED traffic at BETTER LEVELS than before for the page.

This document is now well-cited around the net in various sources and it’s an incredibly important document for all webmasters because it gives you an idea that **you ARE up against an ARMY of human website reviewers** who are **rating how user friendly your**

website is, and grading the quality and trustworthiness of your business (from signals it can detect online, starting with your company website).

If you are interested in getting a copy, it is still widely available online (using Google).

UPDATE: Google themselves released a copy of the **2015 Google Quality Rater Guidelines** which you can download [here](#). I go into the most important findings below.

Quality Raters Do Not Directly Impact YOUR site

Ratings from evaluators do not determine individual site rankings. GOOGLE

While Google is on record as stating these quality raters do not directly influence where you rank (without more senior analysts making a call on the quality of your website, I presume?) – there are some things in this document, mostly of a user experience nature (UX) that all search engine optimisers and webmasters of any kind should note going forward.

From what I've seen of the recent Panda drops, an unsatisfying user experience signal can impact rankings even on a REPUTABLE DOMAIN and even with SOUND, SATISFYING CONTENT.

Quality Bar – Always Rising – Always Relative?

You've got to imagine all these quality ratings are getting passed along to the engineers at Google in some form (at some stage) to improve future algorithms – and identify borderline cases.

This is the 'quality' bar I've mentioned a couple of times in past posts. Google is always raising it – always adding new signals, sometimes, in time, taking signals away.

It helps them

1. satisfy users
2. control the bulk of transactional web traffic.

That positioning has always been a win-win for Google – and a recognisable strategy from them after all these years.

Take [unnatural links](#) out of the equation (which have a history of trumping most other signals) and you are left with page level, site level and off-site signals that will need to be addressed to insulate against Google Panda (if that can ever be fully successful, against an

algorithm that is modified to periodically “ask questions” of your site and overall quality score).

Google **holds different types of sites to different standards for different kinds of keywords** – which would suggest not all websites need all signals satisfied to rank well in SERPs – not ALL THE TIME.

OBSERVATION – You can have the content and the links – but if your site falls short on even a single user satisfaction signal (even if it is picked up by the algorithm, and not a human reviewer) then your rankings for particular terms could collapse – OR – rankings can be held back – IF Google thinks your organisation, with its resources, or ‘reputation, should be delivering... a little more to users.

OBSERVATION: A site often rises (in terms of traffic numbers) in Google, before a *Panda* ‘penalty’. Maybe your site has been rated more in-depth – however that has been done.

- Perhaps a problem was only identified on a closer look?
- Perhaps a closer look is only initiated when your ‘ticking boxes’ in Google and getting high marks – and more traffic – for each check until your site hits a PROBLEM in an area of damaging user experience, for instance.
- Perhaps the introduction of a certain SEO technique initially artificially raised your rankings for your pages in a way that Google’s algorithms do not like, and once that problem is spread out throughout your site, traffic begins to deteriorate or is slammed in an algorithm update.

Google says about the guide:

“Note: Some webmasters have read these rating guidelines and have included information on their sites to influence your Page Quality rating!”

Surely – that’s NOT a bad thing, to make your site HIGHER QUALITY and correctly MARKETING your business to customers – and search quality raters, in the process. Black hats will obviously fake all that (which is why it would be self-defeating of me to publish a handy list of signals to manipulate SERPs that’s not just unnatural links).

Businesses that care about the performance in Google organic should be noting ALL the following points very carefully.

This isn’t about manipulating quality Raters – it is about making it EASY for them to realise you are a REAL business, with a GOOD REPUTATION, and have a LEVEL of EXPERTISE you wish to share with the world. The aim is to create a good user experience, not fake it:

The aim is to *create* a good user experience, not *fake* it:

- **What is the PURPOSE of your page?** Is it to “*sell products or services*”, “*to entertain*” or “*to share information about a topic*.” MAKE THE PURPOSE OF YOUR PAGE SINGULAR and OBVIOUS to help quality raters and algorithms. The name of the game in 2016 (if you’re not faking everything) is VISITOR SATISFACTION. If a visitor lands on your page – are they satisfied and can they successfully complete WHY they are there?
- **YMYL Pages** – Google classifies web pages that “*potentially impact the future happiness, health, or wealth of users*” as “*Your Money or Your Life*” pages (YMYL) and hold these types of pages to higher standards than, for instance, hobby and informational sites. Essentially, if you are selling something to visitors or advising on important matters like finance, law or medical advice – your page will be held to this higher standard.
- **What Is Google Focused On?** – Google is VERY interested in the MAIN CONTENT of a page, the SUPPLEMENTARY CONTENT of a page and HOW THAT PAGE IS monetised, and if that monetisation impacts the user experience of consuming the MAIN CONTENT. **Be careful optimising your site for CONVERSION first, if that gets in the way of the main content.** Google also has a Page Layout Algorithm that demotes pages with a lot of ADs “above the fold” or that users have to scroll past advertisements to get to the main content. High-quality supplementary content should “(contribute) to a satisfying user experience on the page and website.”
- **Google says, “(Main CONTENT) is (or should be!) the reason the page exists.”** so this is probably the most important part of the page, to Google.
- An example of “**supplementary**” content is “navigation links that allow users to visit other parts of the website” and “footers” and “headers.”
- **Help quality raters EASILY research the reputation of your website**, if you have any history. **Make “reputation information about the website” easy to access for a quality rater**, as judging the reputation of your website is a large part of what they do. You will need to monitor, or influence, ‘independent’ reviews about your business – because if they are negative – Google will “*trust the independent sources*”. Consider a page that highlights your good press, if you have any.
- Google will consider “**positive user reviews as evidence of positive reputation.**” so come up with a way to get legitimate positive reviews – and starting on Google would be a good place to start.
- Google states, “*News articles, Wikipedia articles, blog posts, magazine articles, forum discussions, and ratings from independent organizations can all be sources of reputation information*” but they also state specifically boasts about a lot of internet traffic, for example, should not influence the quality rating of a web page. What *should* influence the reputation of a page is WHO has shared it on social media etc. rather than just raw numbers of shares. CONSIDER CREATING A PAGE with [nofollow links](#) to good reviews on other websites as proof of excellence.

- **Google wants quality raters to examine sub pages of your site and often “the URL of its associated homepage”** so ensure your home page is modern, up to date, informative and largely **ON TOPIC with your internal pages**.
- Google wants to know a few things about your website, including:
 - Who is moderating the content on the site
 - Who is responsible for the website
 - Who owns copyright of the content
 - Business details (which is important to have synced and accurate across important social media profiles)
 - When was this content updated?
- Be careful syndicating other people’s content. Algorithmic duplicate problems aside.....if there is a problem with that content, **Google will hold the site it finds content on as ‘responsible’ for that content**.
- If you take money online, in any way, you **NEED** to have an accessible and **satisfying ‘customer service’ type page**. Google says, *“Contact information and customer service information are extremely important for websites that handle money, such as stores, banks, credit card companies, etc. Users need a way to ask questions or get help when a problem occurs. For shopping websites, we’ll ask you to do some special checks. Look for contact information—including the store’s policies on payment, exchanges, and returns.”* Google urges quality raters to be a ‘detective’ in finding this information about you – so it must be important to them.
- **Keep webpages updated regularly and let users know when the content was last updated**. Google wants raters to *“search for evidence that effort is being made to keep the website up to date and running smoothly.”*
- Google quality raters are trained to be sceptical of any reviews found. It’s normal for all businesses to have mixed reviews, but *“Credible, convincing reports of fraud and financial wrongdoing is evidence of extremely negative reputation”*.
- Google asks quality raters to investigate your reputation by searching “giving the example [“ibm.com” reviews –site:ibm.com]: A search on Google for reviews of “ibm.com” which excludes pages on ibm.com.” – So I would do that search yourself and judge for yourself what your reputation is. Very low ratings on independent websites could play a factor in where you rank in the future – ” with Google stating clearly *“very low ratings on the BBB site to be evidence for a negative reputation”*. Other sites mentioned to review your business include YELP and Amazon. Often – using rich snippets containing schema.org information – you can get Google to display user ratings in the actual SERPs. I noted you can get ‘stars in SERPs’ within two days after I added the code (March 2014).

- If you can get a Wikipedia page – get one!. Keep it updated too. For the rest of us, we’ll just need to work harder to prove you are a real business that has earned its rankings.
- If you have a lot of NEGATIVE reviews – expect to be treated as a business with an “Extremely negative reputation” – and back in 2013 – Google mentioned they had an algorithm for this, too. Google has said the odd bad review is not what this algorithm looks for, as bad reviews are a natural part of the web.
- For quality raters, Google has a Page Quality Rating Scale with 5 rating options along a spectrum of “*Lowest, Low, Medium, High, and Highest.*”
- Google says “***High-quality pages are satisfying and achieve their purpose well***” and has lots of “satisfying” content, **written by an expert or authority in their field** – they go on to include “***About Us information***” pages, and easy to access “***Contact or Customer Service information, etc.***”
- **Google is looking for a “website that is well cared for and maintained”** so you need to keep content management systems updated, check for broken image links and HTML links. If you create a frustrating user experience through sloppy website maintenance – expect that to be reflected in some way with a lower quality rating. Google Panda October 2014 went for e-commerce pages that were optimised ‘the old way’ and are now classed as ‘thin content’.
- **Google wants raters to navigate your site and ‘test’ it out to see if it is working.** They tell raters to check your shopping cart function is working properly, for instance.
- **Google expects pages to “be edited, reviewed, and updated on a regular basis”** especially if they are for important issues like medical information, and states not all pages are held to such standards, but one can expect that Google wants information updated in a reasonable timescale. How reasonable is dependant on TOPIC and the PURPOSE of this web page – **RELATIVE to competing pages.**
- **Google wants to rank pages by expert authors, not from content farms.**
- **You can’t have a great piece of content on a site with a negative reputation and expect it to perform well.** A “*High rating cannot be used for any website that has a convincing negative reputation.*”
- A very **positive reputation** can lift your content from “*medium*” to “*high-quality*”.
- Google doesn’t care about ‘pretty’ over substance and clearly instructs raters to “*not rate based on how “nice” the page looks*”.
- **Just about every webpage should have a CLEAR way to contact the site manager to achieve a high rating.**
- Highlighting ads in your design is BAD practice, and Google gives clear advice to rate the page LOW – **Google wants you to optimise for A SATISFYING EXPERIENCE**

FIRST, CONVERSION SECOND! Conversion optimisers especially should take note of this, and aren't we all?

- **Good news for web designers, content managers and search engine optimisers! ”** Google clearly states, *“If the website feels inadequately updated and inadequately maintained for its purpose, the Low rating is probably warranted.”* although does stipulate again its horses for courses.....if everybody else is crap, then you'll still fly – not much of those SERPs about these days.
- If your intent is to deceive, be malicious or present pages with no purpose other than to monetise free traffic with no value ad – Google is not your friend.
- Domains that are ‘related’ in Whois can lead to a low-quality score, so be careful how you direct people around multiple sites you own.
- Keyword stuffing your pages is not recommended, even if you do get past the algorithms.
- Quality raters are on the lookout for content that is *“copied with minimal alteration”* and crediting the original source is not a way to get around this. Google rates this type of activity low-quality.
- **How can Google trust a page if it is blocked from it or from reading critical elements that make up that page?** Be VERY careful blocking Google from important directories (blocking CSS and .js files are very risky these days). **REVIEW your ROBOTS.txt and know exactly what you are blocking and why you are blocking it.**

It's important to note your website quality is often judged on the quality of competing pages for this keyword phrase. SEO is still a horserace. A lot of this is all RELATIVE to what YOUR COMPETITION are doing.

How relative?

Big sites v small sites?

Sites with a lot of links v not a lot of links?

Big companies with a lot of staff v small companies with a few staff?

Do sites at the top of Google get asked more of? Algorithmically and manually? Just.... because they are at the top?

Whether its algorithmsrithmic or manual – based on technical, architectural, reputation or content – Google can decide and will decide if your site meets its quality requirements to rank on page one.

The likelihood of you ranking stable at number one is almost non-existent in any competitive niche where you have more than a few players aiming to rank number one. Not en-masse, not unless you are bending the rules.

My own strategy for visibility over the last few years has been to avoid focusing entirely on ranking for particular keywords and rather improve the search experience of my entire website.

The entire budget of my time went on content improvement, content reorganisation, website architecture improvement, and lately, mobile experience improvement. I have technical improvements to speed, usability and accessibility in the pipeline.

In simple terms I took thin content and made it fat to make old content perform better.

Unsurprisingly, ranking Fat content comes with it own challenges as the years go by.

Can you still rank with thin content?

Yes.

Ranking top depends on the query and level of competition for the query. Google's high-quality recommendations are often for specific niches and specific searches as most of the web would not meet the very highest requirements.

Generally speaking – real quality will stand out, in any niche with a lack of it, at the moment. The time it takes for this to happen (at Google's end) leaves a lot to be desired in some niches. TIME – something Google has an almost infinite supply of compared to 99% of the businesses on the planet – is on Google's side. That's for another post, though....

High Quality characteristics' of a page

The following are examples of what Google calls 'high-quality characteristics' of a page and should be remembered:

- “*A satisfying or comprehensive amount of very high-quality*” main content (MC)
- Copyright notifications up to date
- Functional page design
- Page author has Topical Authority
- High-Quality Main Content
- Positive Reputation or expertise of website or author (Google yourself)
- Very helpful SUPPLEMENTARY content “*which improves the user experience.*”
- Trustworthy
- Google wants to reward ‘expertise’ and ‘everyday expertise’ or experience so make this clear (Author Box?)
- Accurate information
- Ads can be at the top of your page as long as it does not distract from the main content on the page
- Highly satisfying website contact information
- Customised and very helpful 404 error pages
- Awards
- Evidence of expertise
- Attention to detail

If Google can detect investment in time and labour on your site – there are indications that they will reward you for this (or at least – you won’t be effected when others are, meaning you rise in Google SERPs when others fall).

Highest Quality

You obviously want the highest quality ‘score’ but looking at the guide that is a lot of work to achieve. Google wants to rate you on the effort you put into your website, and how satisfying a visit is to your pages.

1. “Very high or highest quality MC, with demonstrated expertise, talent, and/or skill.”
2. “Very high level of expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness (page and website) on the topic of the page.”
3. “Very good reputation (website or author) on the topic of the page.”

At least for competitive niches where Google intend to police this quality recommendation, Google wants to reward high-quality pages and “the Highest rating may be justified for pages with a satisfying or comprehensive amount of very high-quality” main content.

If your main content is very poor, with “*grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation errors*“, or not helpful or trustworthy – ANYTHING that can be interpreted as a bad user experience – you can expect to get a low rating.

“We will consider content to be Low quality if it is created without adequate time, effort, expertise, or talent/skill. Pages with low-quality (main content) do not achieve their purpose well.”

Note – not ALL thin pages are low-quality. If you can satisfy the user with a page thin on content – you are ok (but probably susceptible to someone building a better page than your, more easily, I’d say). This is a good article about [long clicks](#).

Google expects more from big brands than they do from your store (but that does not mean you shouldn’t be aiming to meet ALL these high-quality guidelines above. If you violate Google Webmaster recommendations for performance in their indexes of the web – you automatically get a low-quality rating.

Poor page design and poor main content and too many ads = you are toast. If a rater is subject to a sneaky redirect – they are instructed to rate your site low.

What Are The Low-Quality Signals Google Looks For?

These include but are not limited to:

1. Lots of spammy comments
2. Low quality content that lacks EAT signal (Expertise + Authority + Trust’')
3. NO Added Value for users
4. Poor page design
5. Malicious harmful or deceptive practices detected
6. Negative reputation
7. Auto generated content
8. No website contact information
9. Fakery or INACCURATE information
10. Untrustworthy
11. Website not maintained
12. Pages just created to link to others
13. Pages lack purpose
14. Keyword stuffing
15. Inadequate customer service pages
16. Sites that use practices Google doesn’t want you to use

Pages can get a neutral rating too.

Pages that have “*Nothing wrong, but nothing special*” about them don’t “*display characteristics associated with a High rating*” and puts you in the middle ground – probably not a sensible place to be a year or so down the line.

Quality raters will rate content as *medium* rating when the author or entity responsible for it is unknown.

If you have multiple editors contributing to your site, you had better have a HIGH EDITORIAL STANDARD.

One could take from all this that Google Quality raters are out to get you if you manage to get past the algorithms, but equally, Google quality raters could be friends you just haven’t met yet.

Somebody must be getting rated highly, right?

Impress a Google Quality rater and get a high rating. If you are a spammer you’ll be pulling out the stops to fake this, naturally, but this is a chance for real businesses to put their best foot forward and HELP quality raters correctly judge the size and relative quality of your business and website.

Real reputation is hard to fake – so if you have it – make sure its on your website and is EASY to access from contact and about pages.

The quality raters handbook is a good training guide for looking for links to disavow, too.

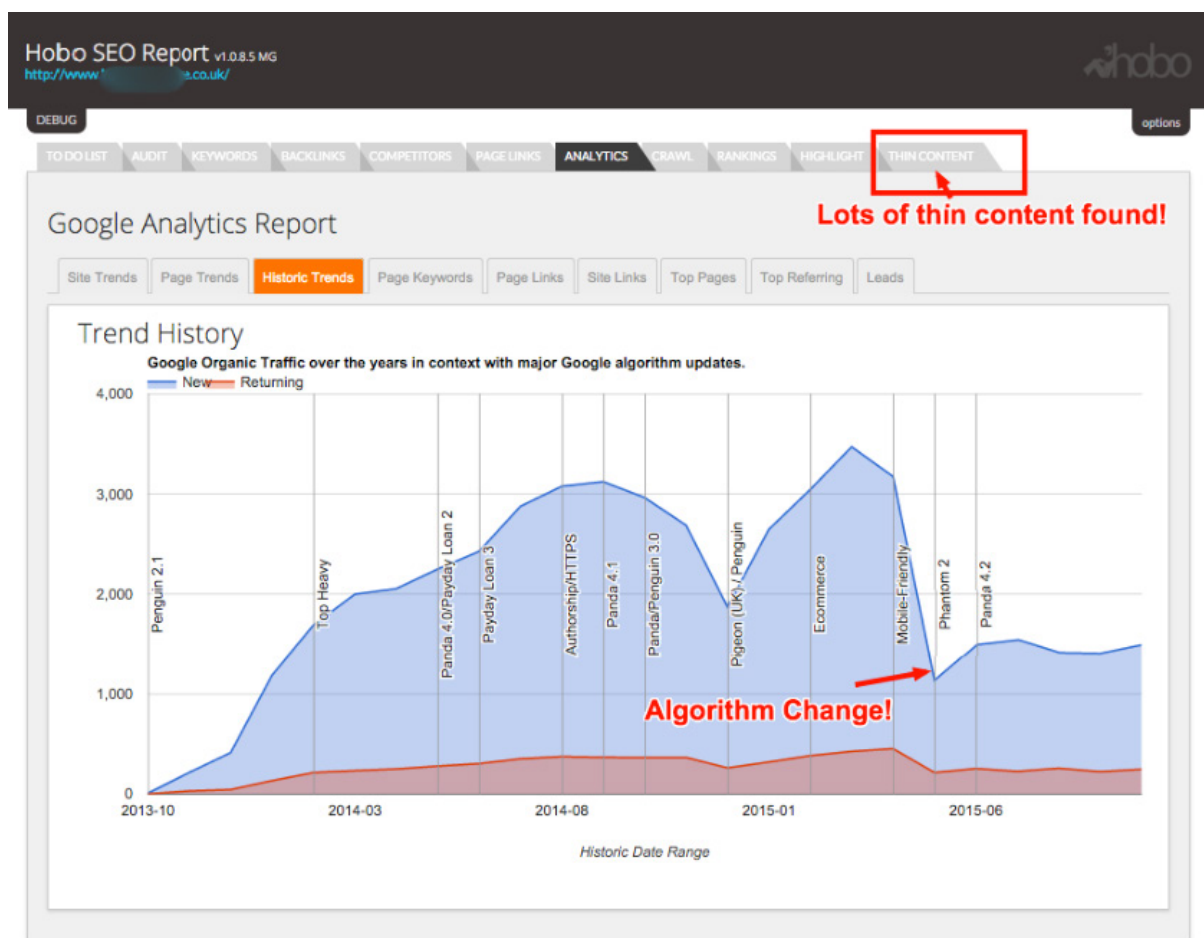
It's pretty clear.

Google organic listings are reserved for 'remarkable' and reputable' content, expertise and trusted businesses. A high bar to meet – and one that is designed for you to never quite meet unless you are serious about competing, as there is so much work involved.

I think the inferred message is call your Adwords rep if you are an unremarkable business.

Google Quality Algorithms

Google has numerous algorithm updates during a year. The *May 2015 Google Quality Algorithm Update* known as the *Phantom 2 Update* or the *Quality Update* is very reminiscent of Google Panda – and focuses on similar ‘low-quality’ SEO techniques we have been told Panda focuses on.



Google Panda Updates

The last Google Panda updates I researched in-depth (and I have most experience in dealing with) is the:

- September 23, 2014 Panda 4.1
- October 24 2014 Google Panda/Quality Algorithm update for E-commerce sites.
- July 2015 Google Panda 4.2 (a rolling update set to last months, we are told)

That – too – is for another post – although my technical [SEO audit](#) identifies it.

I've worked on quite a few sites that got hit on October 2014, May 2015 and that have suffered a loss in traffic since July 2015 – and the similarities between them and the extent of their problems is striking and enlightening – at least in part.

There is little chance of Google Panda recovery if you do not take action to deal with what the Google Panda algorithm has identified is ‘a poor user experience’ on your website. Likewise, old SEO techniques need cleaned up to avoid related Google Quality Algorithms.

What Is Google Panda?

Google Panda aims to rate the quality of your pages and website and is based on things about your site that Google can rate, or algorithmically identify. We are told the current Panda is an attempt to basically stop low-quality thin content pages ranking for keywords they shouldn't rank for.

Panda evolves – signals can come and go – Google can get better at determining quality as a spokesman from Google has confirmed :

“So it's not something where we'd say, if your website was previously affected, then it will always be affected. Or if it wasn't previously affected, it will never be affected.... sometimes we do change the criteria.... category pages.... (I) wouldn't see that as something where Panda would say, this looks bad.... Ask them the questions from the Panda blog post..... usability, you need to work on.” [John Mueller](#).

In my notes about [Google Penguin](#), I list the original, somewhat abstract, Panda ranking ‘factors’ published as a guideline for creating high-quality pages. I also list these Panda points below:

(PS – I have **emphasised** two of the bullet points below, at the top and bottom because I think it's easier to understand these points **as a question, how to work that question out, and ultimately, what Google really cares about – what their users think.**

- *Would you trust the information presented in this article? (YES or NO)*
- *Is this article written by an expert or enthusiast who knows the topic well, or is it more shallow in nature? EXPERTISE*
- *Does the site have duplicate, overlapping, or redundant articles on the same or similar topics with slightly different keyword variations? LOW QUALITY CONTENT/THIN CONTENT*
- *Would you be comfortable giving your credit card information to this site? (HTTPS? OTHER TRUST SIGNALS (CONTACT/ABOUT / PRIVACY / COPYRIGHT etc.)*
- *Does this article have spelling, stylistic, or factual errors? (SPELLING + GRAMMAR + CONTENT QUALITY – perhaps wrong dates in content, on old articles, for instance)*
- *Are the topics driven by genuine interests of readers of the site, or does the site generate content by attempting to guess what might rank well in search engines? (OLD SEO TACTICS\DOORWAY PAGES)*
- *Does the article provide original content or information, original reporting, original research, or original analysis? (ORIGINAL RESEARCH & SATISFYING CONTENT)*
- *Does the page provide substantial value when compared to other pages in search results? (WHAT'S THE RELATIVE QUALITY OF COMPETITION LIKE FOR THIS TERM?)*
- *How much quality control is done on content? (WHEN WAS THIS LAST EDITED? Is CONTENT OUTDATED? IS SUPPLEMENTARY CONTENT OUTDATED (External links and images?))*
- *Does the article describe both sides of a story? (IS THIS A PRESS RELEASE?)*
- *Is the site a recognized authority on its topic? (EXPERTISE)*
- *Is the content mass-produced by or outsourced to a large number of creators, or spread across a large network of sites, so that individual pages or sites don't get as much attention or care? (IS THIS CONTENT BOUGHT FROM A \$5 per article content factory? Or is written by an EXPERT or someone with a lot of EXPERIENCE of the subject matter?)*
- *Was the article edited well, or does it appear sloppy or hastily produced? (QUALITY CONTROL on EDITORIALS)*
- *For a health related query, would you trust information from this site? (EXPERTISE NEEDED)*
- *Would you recognize this site as an authoritative source when mentioned by name? (EXPERTISE NEEDED)*

- *Does this article provide a complete or comprehensive description of the topic? (Is the page text designed to help a visitor or shake them down for their cash?)*
- *Does this article contain insightful analysis or interesting information that is beyond obvious? (LOW QUALITY CONTENT – You know it when you see it)*
- *Is this the sort of page you'd want to bookmark, share with a friend, or recommend? (Would sharing this page make you look smart or dumb to your friends? This should be reflected in social signals)*
- *Does this article have an excessive amount of ads that distract from or interfere with the main content? (OPTIMISE FOR SATISFACTION FIRST – CONVERSION SECOND – do not let the conversion get in the way of satisfying the INTENT of the page. For example – if you rank with INFORMATIONAL CONTENT with a purpose to SERVE those visitors – the visitor should land on your destination page and not be deviated from the PURPOSE of the page – and that was informational, in this example – to educate. SO – educate first – beg for social shares on those articles – and leave the conversion on Merit and slightly more subtle influences rather than massive banners or whatever that annoy users). We KNOW ads (OR DISTRACTING CALL TO ACTIONS) convert well at the tops of articles – but Google says it is sometimes a bad user experience. You run the risk of Google screwing with your rankings as you optimise for conversion so be careful and keep everything simple and obvious.*
- *Would you expect to see this article in a printed magazine, encyclopedia or book? (Is this a HIGH QUALITY article?)... no? then....*
- *Are the articles short, unsubstantial, or otherwise lacking in helpful specifics? (Is this a LOW or MEDIUM QUALITY ARTICLE? LOW WORD COUNTS ACROSS PAGES?)*
- *Are the pages produced with great care and attention to detail vs. less attention to detail? (Does this page impress?)*
- ***Would users complain when they see pages from this site? (WILL THIS PAGE MAKE GOOGLE LOOK STUPID IF IT RANKS TOP?)***

All that sits quite nicely with information you can view in the Quality rating guidelines.

If you fail to meet these standards (even some) your rankings can fluctuate wildly (and often, as Google updates Panda every month we are told and often can spot rolling in). It all probably correlates quite nicely too, with the type of sites you don't want links from.

Google is raising the quality bar, and forcing optimisers and content creators to spend HOURS, DAYS or WEEKS longer on websites if they 'expect' to rank HIGH in natural results.

If someone is putting the hours in to rank their site through legitimate efforts – Google will want to reward that – because it keeps the barrier to entry HIGH for most competitors. The

higher it is – the better option Adwords is to businesses. When Google does not reward effort – a new black hat is born, I'd say.

Google might be asking things of YOUR site it is NOT ASKING of competing sites once it's worked out whatever your RELATIVE AUTHORITY AND SIZE are in comparison to these other sites.

I ****think**** I have actually spotted this when testing for 'quality signals' on a granular level that are machine identifiable.

Thresholds that are detected ALGORITHMICALLY and MANUALLY in, probably, a self-feeding cycle to improve algorithms. I mean – Google says a quality rater does not affect your site, but if your site gets multiple LOW QUALITY notices from manual reviewers – that stuff is coming back to get you later, surely.

User Experience = SEO WIN!

“Google engineer Gary Illyes talked a lot about user experience and how webmasters really need to focus on that.” [Search Engine Land](#).

Google’s idea about ‘user experience’ seems to be something a lot different from what I am used to reading about. I think a lot of ‘user experience’ Google is on about is more to do with avoiding their punishing algorithms.

If it’s about *real* user experience, then we all need to listen to the real usability and user experience experts.

Here’s what they say.....(and note how the experts go on about the “purpose” of the page... does that sound familiar? Lots of these items sound familiar.... but then I have been interested in accessibility and usability most of my career).

Nobody knows exactly the signals Google to rank pages uses on every SERP at any given time. The information we have – unless you test things for yourself – comes from Google and is meant to discombobulate you. I knew one day I would use that word.

Further Reading

- [How Fast Should A Website Load?](#)
- [When is the ‘Low’ And ‘Lowest’ Quality Rating Appropriate for a Website?](#)
- [‘User Experience’ is Not A Ranking Factor But Is Mentioned 16 times in Google Quality Raters Guide](#)
- [Example ‘High Quality’ Ecommerce Site From Google Search Quality Rating Guidelines 2015](#)
- [Identifying Which Pages On Your Own Site Hurt Or Help Your Rankings](#)

Website Usability Tips

The following usability tips have been taken from [Nielson](#) and I have filtered them to focus on items that could be useful, now and in the future, to help maximise the chance you meet the bar on required algorithmic or manual quality ratings:

Home Page Tips

1. Show the company name and/or logo in a reasonable size and noticeable location.
2. Include a tag line that explicitly summarizes what the site or company does.
3. Emphasize what your site does that's valuable from the user's point of view, as well as how you differ from key competitors.
4. Emphasize the highest priority tasks so that users have a clear starting point on the homepage.
5. Clearly designate one page per site as the official homepage.
6. On your main company website, don't use the word "website" to refer to anything but the totality of the company's web presence.
7. Design the homepage to be clearly different from all the other pages on the site.
8. Group corporate information, such as About Us, Investor Relations, Press Room, Employment and other information about the company, in one distinct area.
9. Include a homepage link to an "About Us" section that gives users an overview about the company and links to any relevant details about your products, services, company values, business proposition, management team, and so forth.
10. If you want to get press coverage for your company, include a "Press Room" or "News Room" link on your homepage.
11. Present a unified face to the customer, in which the website is one of the touchpoints rather than an entity unto itself.
12. Include a "Contact Us" link on the homepage that goes to a page with all contact information for your company.
13. If you provide a "feedback" mechanism, specify the purpose of the link and whether customer service or the webmaster will read it, and so forth.

14. Don't include internal company information (which is targeted for employees and should go on the intranet) on the public website.
15. If your site gathers any customer information, include a "Privacy Policy" link on the homepage.
16. Explain how the website makes money if it's not self-evident.

Content Writing Tips

1. Use customer-focused language.
2. Avoid redundant content
3. Don't use clever phrases and marketing lingo that make people work too hard to figure out what you're saying
4. Use consistent capitalization and other style standards.
5. Don't label a clearly defined area of the page if the content is sufficiently self-explanatory.
6. Avoid single-item categories and single-item bulleted lists.
7. Use non-breaking spaces between words in phrases that need to go together in order to be scan able and understood.
8. Only use imperative language such as "Enter a City or Zip Code" for mandatory tasks, or qualify the statement appropriately.
9. Spell out abbreviations, initialisms, and acronyms, and immediately follow them by the abbreviation, in the first instance.
10. Avoid exclamation marks!
11. Use all uppercase letters sparingly or not at all as a formatting style.
12. Avoid using spaces and punctuation inappropriately, for emphasis.
13. Use examples to reveal the site's content, rather than just describing it.
14. For each example, have a link that goes directly to the detailed page for that example, rather than to a general category page of which that item is a part.
15. Provide a link to the broader category next to the specific example.

16. Make sure it's obvious which links lead to follow-up information about each example and which links lead to general information about the category as a whole.
17. Make it easy to access anything that has been recently featured on your homepage, for example, in the last two weeks or month, by providing a list of recent features as well as putting recent items into the permanent archives.

Links

- Differentiate links and make them scan able. Begin links with the information-carrying word, because users often scan through the first word or two of links to compare them.
- Don't use generic instructions, such as "Click Here" as a link name.
- Don't use generic links, such as "More..." at the end of a list of items.
- Allow link colours to show visited and unvisited states. Reserve blue for unvisited links and use a clearly discernable and less saturated colour for visited links. NOT GREY. HIGH CONTRAST!
- Don't use the word "Links" to indicate links on the page.
- If a link does anything other than

got another web page, such as linking to a PDF file or launching an audio or video player, email message, or another application, make sure the link explicitly indicates what will happen.

Best Practices

- Give users an input box on the homepage to enter search queries, instead of just giving them a link to a search page.
- Explain the benefits and frequency of publication to users before asking them for their email addresses.
- Don't offer users features to customize the basic look of the homepage UI, such as colour schemes.
- Don't automatically refresh the homepage to push updates to users
- Don't waste space crediting the search engine, design firm, favorite browser company, or the technology behind the scenes.
- Have a plan for handling critical content on your website in the event of an emergency.
- Don't literally welcome users to your site. Before you give up prime homepage real estate to a salutation, consider using it for a tag line instead.
- Avoid popup windows.

Ads

- If you place ads outside the standard banner area at the top of the page, label them as advertising so that users don't confuse them with your site's content.
- Keep external ads (ads for companies other than your own) as small and discreet as possible relative to your core homepage content.
- Keep ads for outside companies on the periphery of the page.
- Take users to your "real" homepage when they type your main URL or click a link to your site.
- Be very careful users do not have to SCROLL to get to your content

News

- As long as all news stories on the homepage occurred within the week, there's no need to list the date and time in the deck of each story, unless it is truly a breaking news item that has frequent updates.
- Link headlines, rather than the deck, to the full news story.
- Write and edit specific summaries for press releases and news stories that you feature on your homepage to minimise duplication.
- Headlines should be succinct, yet descriptive, to give maximum information in as few words as possible.

Tech

- If available, register domain names for alternative spellings, abbreviations, or common misspellings of the site name.
- If you have alternative domain name spellings, choose one as the authorized version and redirect users to it from all the other spellings.
- For any website that has an identity closely connected to a specific country other than the United States, use that country's top-level domain.
 - Homepages for commercial websites should have the URL <http://www.company.com> (or an equivalent for your country or non-commercial top-level domain) .Do not append complex codes or even "index.html" after the domain name.
- Don't provide tools that reproduce browser functionality
- Don't include tools unrelated to tasks users come to your site to do.
- Offer users direct access to high-priority tasks on the homepage.

Titles

Note – These items are from A USABILITY point of view and here for your reference. See my advice on Page titles for SEO benefits for more information on this. For instance – there are SEO benefits for LONGER TITLES than usability experts recommend.

- Limit window titles to no more than seven or eight words and fewer than 64 total characters.
- Include a short description of the site in the window title.
- Don't include "homepage" in the title. This adds verbiage without value.
- Don't include the top-level domain name, such as ".com" in the window title unless it is actually part of the company name, such as "Amazon.com."
- Begin the window title with the information-carrying word — usually the company name.

Menus

- Use drop down menus sparingly, especially if the items in them are not self-explanatory.
- Avoid using multiple text entry boxes on the homepage, especially in the upper part of the page where people tend to look for the search feature.
- Never use widgets for parts of the screen that you don't want people to click. Make sure widgets are clickable

Logos

- Use logos judiciously.
- Use a liquid layout/responsive design so the homepage size adjusts to different screen resolutions.
- The most critical page elements should be visible "above the fold" (in the first screen of content, without scrolling) at the most prevalent window size
- Avoid horizontal scrolling at 1024×768.
- Use high-contrast text and background colours so that type is as legible as possible.
 - Limit font styles and other text formatting, such as sizes, colours, and so forth on the page because over-designed text can actually detract from the meaning of the words.

Be consistent. Be Transparent. Meet Visitor Expectation.

Deliver on Purpose.

PUTTING IT ALTOGETHER

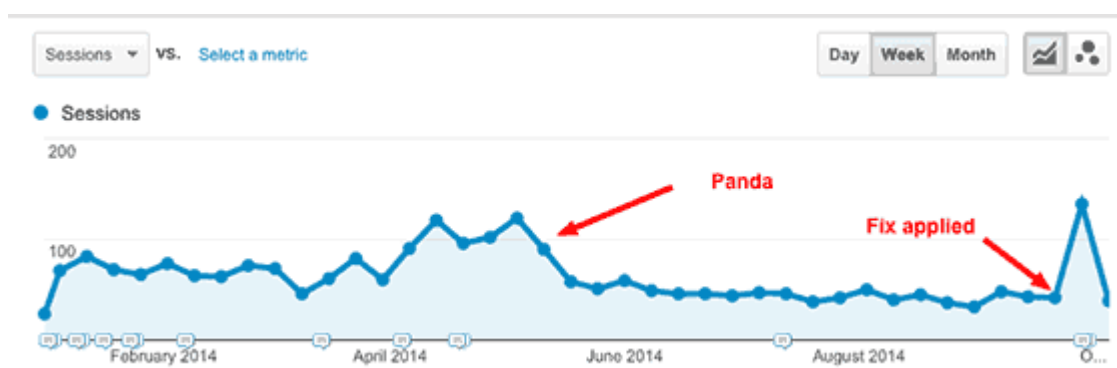
Google Panda explained? Not quite...I have tested what I have talked about here – and my testing over the last few years has been to identify priorities Google seems to be taking into consideration when rating sites.

You do need to realise that Google Panda and other algorithms deal with pages where the intent is largely INFORMATIONAL or TRANSACTIONAL – and Google has strategies to deal with both.

Thin pages, for instance, on an informational site is different from thin content on an e-commerce site.

The quality signals an e-commerce site will have to display will be different from that of a hobby site, and as such, will be held to higher standards – and somebody somewhere will always be ready to compete for that if the prize is free traffic from Google.

Below is the response to a test page when I implemented ONE of THE most critical ‘user experience’ improvements.



Fixing A User Experience Signal on ONE PAGE led to RECOVERED traffic at BETTER LEVELS than before for the page!

NOTE – High Quality ‘Supplemental’ Content leading to external sites!

Here is some high-quality ‘*supplemental content*’ for you to continue learning about Google Panda and ratings guidelines, and some others.

Although I think I’ve covered the most important aspects above, for most webmasters, the following write-ups and analysis should expand your horizons on Page Quality and the Google Panda Algorithm:

- Guidelines for Home Page Visibility – <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/113-design-guidelines-homepage-usability/>
- The Companies Act 2007 – <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/the-companies-act/>
- Panda 4 Analysis – <http://www.hmtweb.com/marketing-blog/panda-4-1-analysis/>
- Understanding the latest Panda patent – <http://www.SEObythesea.com/2014/09/new-panda-update-new-panda-patent/>
- Google Panda tips – <http://macedynamics.com/research/content-quality-score/>
- Another overview of the Quality Ratings Guide – <http://macedynamics.com/research/content-quality-score/>
- Interview with a quality rater – <http://searchengineland.com/interview-google-search-quality-rater-108702>
- More info about the Quality Guidelines – <http://www.thesempost.com/google-rewrites-quality-rating-guide-SEOs-need-know/>
- Google Quality Raters can't cause a ranking drop (on their own, at least) – <http://searchengineland.com/google-quality-raters-cant-cause-site-to-drop-in-rankings-103850>
- Another earlier review of the quality guidelines – <http://www.potpiegirl.com/2011/10/how-google-makes-algorithm-changes/>
- Google Panda updates history – <http://searchengineland.com/panda-update-rolling-204313>
- Website Usability Tips – <http://www.usereffect.com/topic/25-point-website-usability-checklist>

Duplicate Content SEO Advice From Google

Duplicate Content SEO Best Practice

Webmasters are confused about penalties for duplicate content, which is a natural part of the web landscape, because Google claims there is NO duplicate content penalty, yet rankings can be impacted negatively, apparently, by what looks like duplicate content problems.

The reality in 2016 is that if Google classifies your duplicate content as THIN content, or BOILER-PLATE content, then you DO have a severe problem that violates Google's website performance recommendations and this 'violation' will need 'cleaned' up.

At the ten minute mark in the above video, John Mueller of Google has recently clarified, with examples, that there is:

“No duplicate content penalty” but “We do have some things *around* duplicate content ... that are penalty worthy“

What is duplicate content?

Here is a definition from Google:

Duplicate content generally refers to substantive blocks of content within or across domains that either completely match other content or are appreciably similar. Mostly, this is not deceptive in origin.....

It's crucial to understand that if, in 2016, as a webmaster you republish posts, press releases, news stories or product descriptions found on other sites, then your pages are very definitely going to struggle to gain traction in Google's SERPs (search engine results pages).

Google doesn't like using the word 'penalty' but if your entire site is made of entirely of republished content – Google does not want to rank it.

If you have a multiple site strategy selling the same products – you are probably going to cannibalise your traffic in the long run, rather than dominate a niche, as you used to be able to do.

This is all down to how a search engine filters duplicate content found on other sites – and the experience Google aims to deliver for it's users – and it's competitors.

Mess up with duplicate content on a website, and it might look like a penalty as the end-result is the same – important pages that once ranked might not rank again – and new content might not get crawled as fast as a result.

Your website might even get a 'manual action' for thin content.

Worse case scenario your website is hit by the [Google Panda algorithm](#).

A good rule of thumb is; do NOT expect to rank high in Google with content found on other, more trusted sites, and don't expect to rank at all if all you are using is automatically generated pages with no 'value add'.

While there are exceptions to the rule, (and Google certainly treats your OWN duplicate content on your OWN site differently), your best bet in ranking in 2016 is to have one single version of content on your site with rich, unique text content that is written specifically for that page.

Google wants to reward RICH, UNIQUE, RELEVANT, INFORMATIVE and REMARKABLE content in its organic listings – and it's raised the quality bar over the last few years.

If you want to rank high in Google for valuable key phrases and for a long time – you better have good, original content for a start – and lots of it.

A very interesting statement in a recent [webmaster hangout](#) was *"how much quality content do you have compared to low-quality content"*. That indicates Google is looking at this ratio. John says to identify *"which pages are high-quality, which pages are lower quality so that the pages that do get indexed are really the high-quality ones."*

What is Boilerplate Content?

Wikipedia says of 'boilerplate' content:

Boilerplate is any **text** that is or can be reused in new contexts or applications without being greatly changed from the original. [WIKI](#)

...and Google says to:

Minimize boilerplate repetition

Google is very probably looking to see if your pages ‘**stand on their own**’ – as John Mueller is oft fond of saying.

How would they do that algorithmically? Well, they *could* look to see if text blocks on your pages were unique to the page, or were very similar blocks of content to other pages on your site.

If this ‘boilerplate’ content is the content that makes up the **PRIMARY** content of multiple pages – Google can easily filter to ignore – or penalise – this practice.

The sensible move would be to listen to Google – and minimise – or at least diffuse – the instances of boilerplate text, page to page on your website.

Note that THIN CONTENT exacerbates BOILERPLATE TEXT problems on a site – as THIN CONTENT just creates more pages that can only be created with boilerplate text – itself, a problem.

E.G. – if a product has 10 URLs – one URL for each colour of the product, for instance – then the TITLE, META DESCRIPTION & PRODUCT DESCRIPTION (and other elements on the page) for these extra pages will probably rely on BOILERPLATE techniques to create them, and in doing so – you create 10 URLs on the site that do ‘not stand on their own’ and essentially duplicate text across pages.

It’s worth listening to John Mueller’s recent advice on this point. He clearly says that the practice of making your text more ‘unique’, using low-quality techniques is:

“probably more counter productive than actually helping your website”

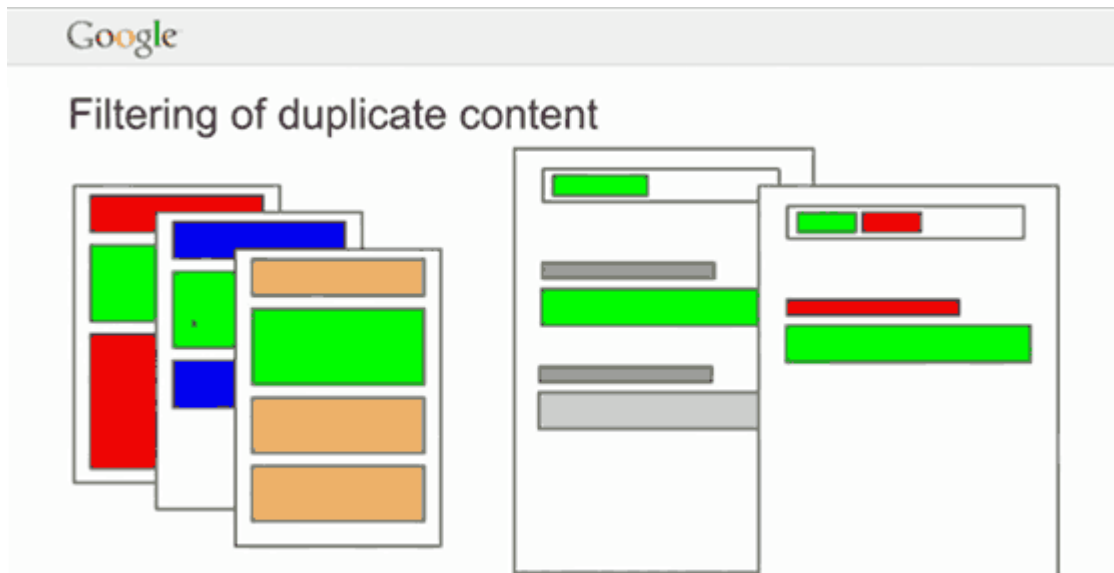
Onsite Problems

If you have many pages of similar content your site, Google might have trouble choosing the page you want to rank, and it might dilute your capability to rank for what you do what to rank for.

For instance, if you have ‘PRINT-ONLY’ versions of web pages (Joomla used to have major issues with this), that can end up displaying in Google instead of your web page if you’ve not handled it properly. That’s probably going to have an impact on conversions – for instance. Poorly implemented mobile sites can cause duplicate content problems, too.

Google Penalty For Duplicate Content On-Site?

Google has given us some explicit guidelines when it comes to managing duplication of content.



John Mueller clearly states in the [video](#) where I grabbed the above image:

“We don’t have a duplicate content penalty. It’s not that we would demote a site for having a lot of duplicate content.”

and

“You don’t get penalized for having this kind of duplicate content”

...in which he was talking about very similar pages. John says to “provide... real unique value” on your pages.

I think that could be understood that Google is not compelled to rank your duplicate content.

If it ignores it, it’s different from a penalty. Your original content can still rank, for instance.

An e-commerce SEO tip from John with:

“variations of product “colours...for product page, but you wouldn’t create separate pages for that.” With these type of pages you are “always balancing is having really, really strong pages for these products, versus having, kind of, medium strength pages for a lot of different products.”

John says:

“one kind of really, really strong generic page” trumps *“hundreds”* of mediocre ones.

If *“essentially, they’re the same, and just variations of keywords”* that should be ok, but if you have ‘*millions*’ of them- Googlebot might think you are building doorway pages, and that IS risky.

Generally speaking, Google will identify the best pages on your site if you have a decent on-site architecture and unique content.

The advice is to avoid duplicate content issues if you can and this should be common sense.

Google wants (and rewards) original content – it’s a great way to push up the cost of SEO and create a better user experience at the same time.

Google doesn’t like it when ANY TACTIC it’s used to manipulate its results, and republishing content found on other websites is a common practice of a lot of spam sites.

Duplicate content on a site is not grounds for action on that site unless it appears that the intent of the duplicate content is to be deceptive and manipulate search engine results.

Google.

You don’t want to look anything like a spam site; that’s for sure – and Google WILL classify your site... as something.

The more you can make it look a human built every page on a page by page basis with content that doesn’t appear exactly in other areas of the site – the more Google will like it. Google does not like automation when it comes to building a website; that’s clear in 2016.

I don’t mind multiple copies of articles on the same site – as you find with WordPress categories or tags, but I wouldn’t have tags **and** categories, for instance, and expect them to rank well on a small site with a lot of higher quality competition, and especially not targeting the same keyword phrases.

I prefer to avoid repeated unnecessary content on my site, and when I do have automatically generated content on a site, I tell Google not to index it with a **noindex** it in [meta tags](#) or XRobots.

I am probably doing the safest thing, as that could be seen as manipulative if I intended to get it indexed.

Google won’t thank you, either, for spidering a calendar folder with 10,000 blank pages on it, or a blog with more categories than original content – why would they?

Offsite Problems

...in some cases, content is deliberately duplicated across domains in an attempt to manipulate search engine rankings or win more traffic. Deceptive practices like this can result in a poor user experience, when a visitor sees substantially the same content repeated within a set of search results. Google tries hard to index and show pages with distinct information. This filtering means, for instance, that if your site has a “regular” and “printer” version of each article, and neither of these is blocked with a noindex meta tag, we’ll choose one of them to list. In the rare cases in which Google perceives that duplicate content may be shown with intent to manipulate our rankings and deceive our users, we’ll also make appropriate adjustments in the indexing and ranking of the sites involved. As a result, the ranking of the site may suffer, or the site might be removed entirely from the Google index, in which case it will no longer appear in search results. **GOOGLE**

If you are trying to compete in competitive niches, you need original content that’s not found on other pages in the same form on your site, and **THIS IS, EVEN MORE, IMPORTANT WHEN THAT CONTENT IS FOUND ON OTHER PAGES ON OTHER WEBSITES.**

Google isn’t under any obligation to rank your version of content – in the end, it depends on who’s site has got the most domain authority or most links coming to the page.

Don’t unnecessarily compete with these duplicate pages by always **rewriting your content** if you think the content will appear on other sites (especially if you are not the first to ‘break it’ if it’s news).

How To Check For Duplicate Content

An easy way to find duplicate content is to use Google. Just take a piece of text content from your site and put it “in quotes” as a search in Google. Google will tell you how many pages that piece of content it found on pages in its index of the web. The best known online duplicate content checker tool is [Copyscape](#) and I particularly like this little [tool](#) too, which check duplicate content ratio between two selections of text.

If you find evidence of plagiarism, you can file a DMCA or [contact Google](#), but I haven’t ever bothered with that, and many folks have republished my articles over the years.

I even found my article in a paid advert in a magazine before.

A Dupe Content Strategy?

There are strategies where this will still work, in the short term. Opportunities are (in my experience) reserved for long tail SERPs where the top ten results page is already crammed full of low-quality results, and the SERPs are shabby – certainly not a strategy for competitive terms.

There's not a lot of traffic in long tail results unless you do it en-mass and that could invite further site quality issues, but sometimes it's worth exploring if using very similar content with geographic modifiers (for instance) on a site with some domain authority has opportunity. Very similar content can be useful across TLDs too. A bit spammy, but if the top ten results are already a bit spammy...

If low-quality pages are performing well in the top ten of an existing long tail SERP – then it's worth exploring – I've used it in the past. I always thought if it improves user experience and is better than what's there in those long tail searches at present, who's complaining?

Unfortunately, that's not exactly [best practice SEO](#) in 2016, and I'd be nervous creating any [low-quality pages](#) on your site these days.

Too many low-quality pages might cause you site wide issues in the future, not just page level issues.

Original Content Is King, they say

Stick to original content, found on only one page on your site, for best results – especially if you have a new/young site and are building it page by page over time... and you'll get better rankings and more traffic to your site (affiliates too!).

Yes – you can be creative and reuse and repackage content, but I always make sure if I am asked to rank a page I will require original content on the page.

There is NO NEED to block your own Duplicate Content

There was a useful post in Google forums a while back with advice from Google how to handle very similar or identical content:

“We now recommend not blocking access to duplicate content on your website, whether with a [robots.txt](#) file or other methods” John Mueller

John also goes on to say some good advice about how to handle duplicate content on your own site:

1. Recognize duplicate content on your website.
2. Determine your preferred URLs.
3. Be consistent within your website.
4. Apply [301 permanent redirects](#) where necessary and possible.
5. Implement the rel="canonical" link element on your pages where you can. (Note – Soon we'll be able to use the Canonical Tag across multiple sites/domains too.)
6. Use the URL parameter handling tool in Google Webmaster Tools where possible.

Webmaster guidelines on content duplication used to say:

Consider blocking pages from indexing: Rather than letting Google's algorithms determine the "best" version of a document, you may wish to help guide us to your preferred version. For instance, if you don't want us to index the printer versions of your site's articles, disallow those directories or make use of regular expressions in your robots.txt file. [Google](#)

but now Google is pretty clear they do NOT want us to block duplicate content, and that is reflected in the guidelines.

Google does not recommend blocking crawler access to duplicate content (dc) on your website, whether with a robots.txt file or other methods. If search engines can't crawl pages with dc, they can't automatically detect that these URLs point to the same content and will therefore effectively have to treat them as separate, unique pages. A better solution is to allow search engines to crawl these URLs, but mark them as duplicates by using the rel="canonical" link element, the URL parameter handling tool, or 301 redirects. In cases where DC leads to us crawling too much of your website, you can also adjust the crawl rate setting in Webmaster Tools. **DC on a site is not grounds for action on that site unless it appears that the intent of the DC is to be deceptive and manipulate search engine results.** If your site suffers from DC issues, and you don't follow the advice listed above, we do a good job of choosing a version of the content to show in our search results.

You want to minimise dupe content, rather than block it. I find the best solution to handling a problem is on a case by case basis. Sometimes I will block Google.

Google says it needs to detect an INTENT to manipulate Google to incur a penalty, and you should be OK if your intent is innocent, BUT it's easy to screw up and LOOK as if you are up to something fishy.

It is also easy to fail to get the benefit of proper canonicalisation and consolidation of relevant primary content if you don't do basic housekeeping, for want of a better turn of phrase.

Canonical Link Element Best Practice

Google also recommends using the canonical link element to help minimise content duplication problems.

If your site contains multiple pages with largely identical content, there are a number of ways you can indicate your preferred URL to Google. (This is called “canonicalization”.)

Google SEO – Matt Cutts from Google shared tips on the rel=”canonical” tag (more accurately – the *canonical link element*) that the 3 top search engines now support. Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft have all agreed to work together in a

“joint effort to help reduce duplicate content for larger, more complex sites, and the result is the new Canonical Tag”.

Example Canonical Tag From Google Webmaster Central blog:

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://www.example.com/product.php?item=swedish-fish" />
```

You can put this link tag in the head section of the problem URLs if you think you need it.

I add a self-referring canonical link element as standard these days – to ANY web page.

Is rel=”canonical” a hint or a directive?

It’s a hint that we honor strongly. We’ll take your preference into account, in conjunction with other signals, when calculating the most relevant page to display in search results.

Can I use a relative path to specify the canonical, such as <link rel=”canonical” href=”product.php?item=swedish-fish” />?

Yes, relative paths are recognized as expected with the <link> tag. Also, if you include a <base> link in your document, relative paths will resolve according to the base URL.

Is it okay if the canonical is not an exact duplicate of the content?

We allow slight differences, e.g., in the sort order of a table of products. We also recognize that we may crawl the canonical and the duplicate pages at different points in time, so we may occasionally see different versions of your content. All of that is okay with us.

What if the rel=”canonical” returns a 404?

We’ll continue to index your content and use a heuristic to find a canonical, but we recommend that you specify existent URLs as canonicals.

What if the rel=”canonical” hasn’t yet been indexed?

Like all public content on the web, we strive to discover and crawl a designated canonical URL quickly. As soon as we index it, we’ll immediately reconsider the rel=”canonical” hint.

Can rel="canonical" be a redirect?

Yes, you can specify a URL that redirects as a canonical URL. Google will then process the redirect as usual and try to index it.

What if I have contradictory rel="canonical" designations?

Our algorithm is lenient: We can follow canonical chains, but we strongly recommend that you update links to point to a single canonical page to ensure optimal canonicalization results.

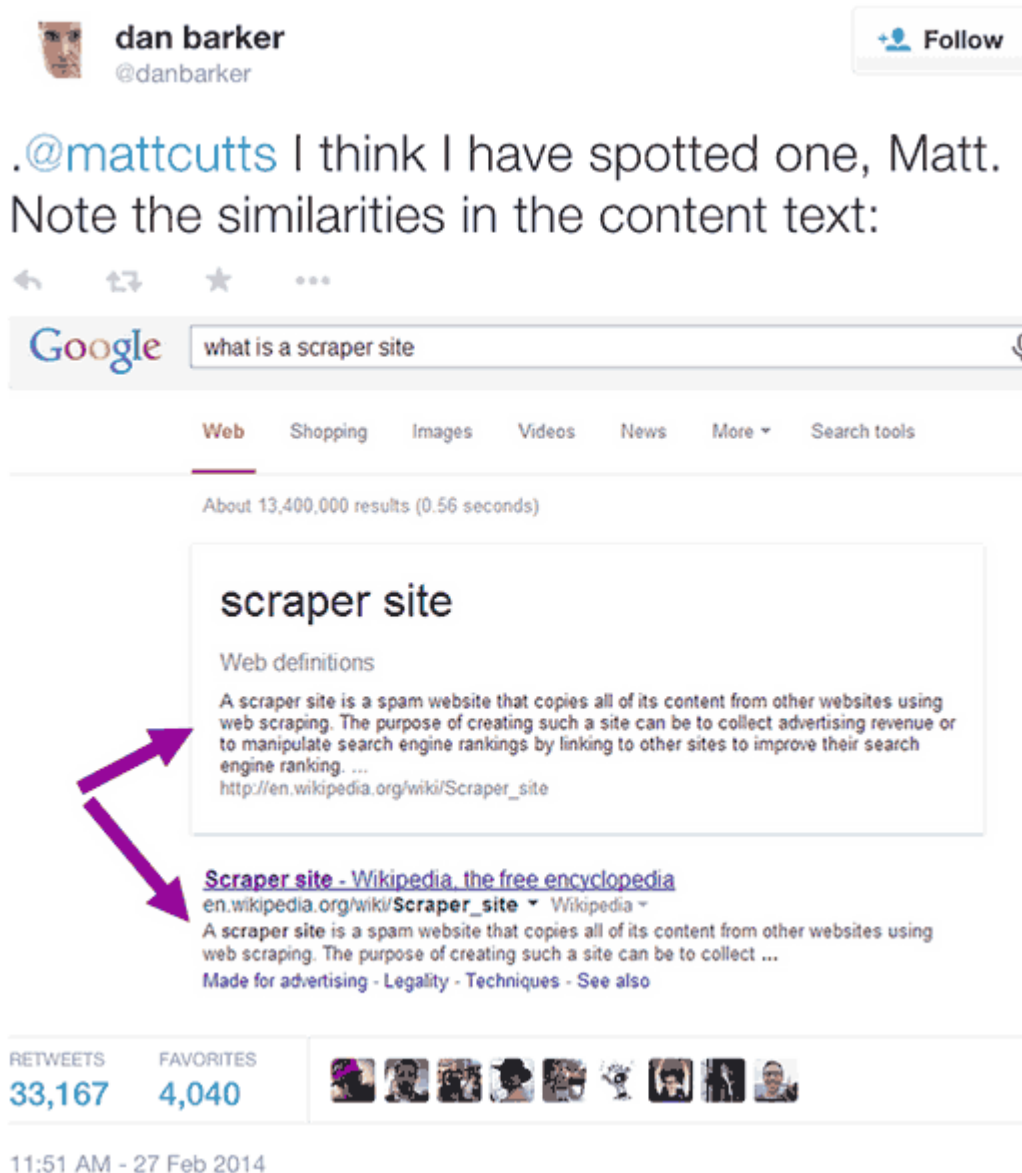
Can this link tag be used to suggest a canonical URL on a completely different domain?

****Update on 12/17/2009: The answer is yes! We now support a cross-domain rel="canonical" link element.****

Tip – Redirect old, out of date content to new, freshly updated articles on the subject, minimising low-quality pages and duplicate content while at the same time, improving the depth and quality of the page you want to rank. See our page on 301 redirects – <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/how-to-change-domain-names-keep-your-rankings-in-google/>.

Tips from Google

As with everything Google does – Google has had its own critics about its use of duplicate content on its own site for its own purposes:



The image shows a tweet from **dan barker** (@danbarker) that reads: ".@mattcutts I think I have spotted one, Matt. Note the similarities in the content text:". Below the tweet is a screenshot of a Google search for "what is a scraper site". The search results show a definition of a scraper site and a link to the Wikipedia page for "Scraper site". Two purple arrows point from the tweet's text to the Wikipedia link and the definition text in the search results.

dan barker
@danbarker

[Follow](#)

.@mattcutts I think I have spotted one, Matt.
Note the similarities in the content text:

Google what is a scraper site

Web Shopping Images Videos News More Search tools

About 13,400,000 results (0.56 seconds)

scraper site

Web definitions

A scraper site is a spam website that copies all of its content from other websites using web scraping. The purpose of creating such a site can be to collect advertising revenue or to manipulate search engine rankings by linking to other sites to improve their search engine ranking. ...
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scraper_site

[Scraper site - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scraper_site)
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scraper_site - Wikipedia

A scraper site is a spam website that copies all of its content from other websites using web scraping. The purpose of creating such a site can be to collect ...
Made for advertising - Legality - Techniques - See also

RETWEETS 33,167 FAVORITES 4,040

11:51 AM - 27 Feb 2014

There are some steps you can take to proactively address duplicate content issues, and ensure that visitors see the content you want them to. **Use 301s:** If you've restructured your site, use 301 redirects ("RedirectPermanent") in your .htaccess file to smartly redirect users,

Googlebot, and other spiders. (In Apache, you can do this with an .htaccess file; in IIS, you can do this through the administrative console.)

Be consistent: Try to keep your internal linking consistent. For example, don't link to <http://www.example.com/page/> and <http://www.example.com/page> and <http://www.example.com/page/index.htm>.

I would also ensure your links are all the same case, and avoid capitalisation and lower case variations of the same URL.

This type of duplication can be quickly sorted keeping internal linking consistent and proper use of canonical link elements.

Use top-level domains: To help us serve the most appropriate version of a document, use top-level domains whenever possible to handle country-specific content. We're more likely to know that <http://www.example.de> contains Germany-focused content, for instance, than <http://www.example.com/de> or <http://de.example.com>.

Google also tell webmasters to choose a preferred domain to rank in Google:

Use Webmaster Tools to tell us how you prefer your site to be indexed: You can tell Google your preferred domain(for example, <http://www.example.com> or <http://example.com>).

...although you should ensure you handle such redirects server side, with 301 redirects redirecting all versions of a URL to one canonical URL (with a self-referring canonical link element).

Minimize boilerplate repetition: For instance, instead of including lengthy copyright text on the bottom of every page, include a very brief summary and then link to a page with more details. In addition, you can use the Parameter Handling tool to specify how you would like Google to treat URL parameters. **Understand your content management system:** Make sure you're familiar with how content is displayed on your web site. Blogs, forums, and related systems often show the same content in multiple formats. For example, a blog entry may appear on the home page of a blog, in an archive page, and in a page of other entries with the same label.

Understand Your CMS

Google says:

Understand your content management system: Make sure you're familiar with how content is displayed on your website. Blogs, forums, and related systems often show the same content in multiple formats. For example, a blog entry may appear on the home page of a blog, in an archive page, and in a page of other entries with the same label.

WordPress, Magento, Joomla, Drupal – they all come with slightly different duplicate content (and crawl equity performance) challenges.

Syndicating Content Comes At A Risk

When it comes to publishing your content on other websites:

Syndicate carefully: If you syndicate your content on other sites, Google will always show the version we think is most appropriate for users in each given search, which may or may not be the version you'd prefer. However, it is helpful to ensure that each site on which your content is syndicated includes a link back to your original article. You can also ask those who use your syndicated material to use the noindex meta tag to prevent search engines from indexing their version of the content.

The problem with syndicating your content is you can never tell if this will ultimately cost you organic traffic.

If it is on other websites – they might be getting ALL the benefit – not you.

It's also worth noting that Google still clearly says in 2016 that you can put links back to your original article in posts that are republished elsewhere. But you need to be careful with that too – as those links could be [classified as unnatural links](#).

A few years ago I made an observation I think that **links on duplicate posts that have been stolen – duplicated and republished – STILL pass anchor text value** (even if it is a light boost).

Take this Cheeky beggar.... – he nicked my [what is SEO](#) post I created and stripped out all my links (cheek!) and published the article as his own.

Well he stripped out all the links apart from one link he missed:

wide links on forums or directories. Get links from pages, that in turn, have a lot of links to them.

- Internally, always cite your other pages by linking to them within text.
- Linking to a page with actual key-phrases in the link help a great deal in all search engines when you want to feature for specific key-terms. i.e. "as opposed to <http://www.dunya.com.pk>".
- **I think that Internal Navigation** is of paramount importance. Google needs links to find your pages. Don't underestimate the value of a clever internal keyword-rich architecture and be sure to understand for instance how many words Google counts in a link.

Search engines like Google "spider" your entire site by following all the links on

Yes, the link to <http://www.dunya.com.pk/> was actually still pointing to my home page.

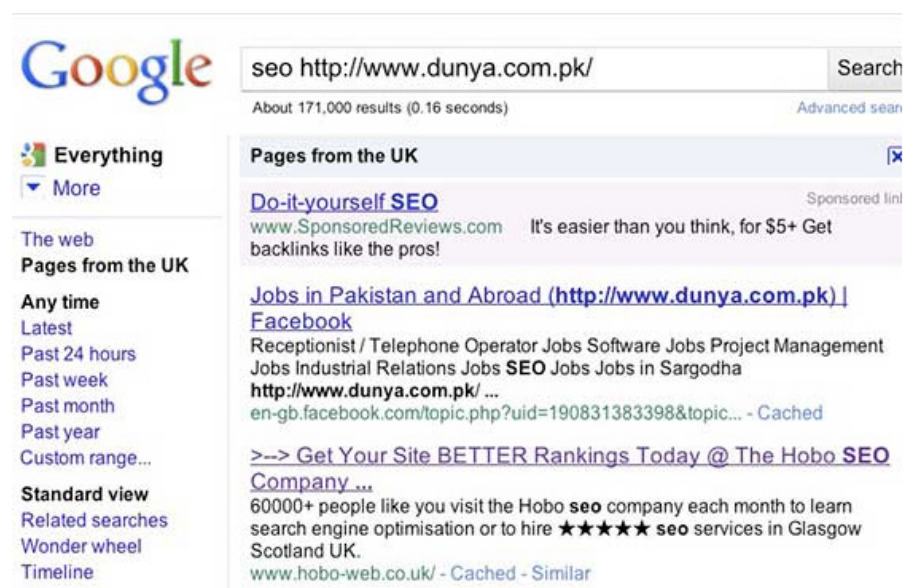
This gave me an opportunity to look at something.....

The article itself wasn't 100% duplicate – there where a small intro text as far as I can see. It was clear by looking at Copyscape just how much of the article is unique and how much is duplicate.

So this is was 3 yr. old article republished on a low-quality site with a link back to my site within a portion of the page that's clearly dupe text.

I would have *thought* Google just ignored that link.

But no, Google did return my page for the following query (at the time):



This [Google Cache notification is now no longer available](#) tells fibs, but is pretty accurate this time:

This is Google's cache of <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/>. It is a snapshot of the page as it appeared on 15 Oct 2010 19:48:05 GMT. The [current page](#) could have changed in the meantime. [Learn more](#)

These search terms are highlighted: **seo** These terms only [Text-only version](#) appear in links pointing to this page: **http www dunya com pk**

... which looks to me **as Google will count links (AT SOME LEVEL) even on duplicate articles republished on other sites** – probably depending on the search query, and the quality of the SERP at that time (perhaps even taking into consideration the quality score of the site with the most trust?).

I'd imagine this to be the case even today.

How to take advantage of this?

Well, you get an idea of just how much original text you need to add to a page for that page to pass some kind of anchor text value (perhaps useful for article marketers). And in this case, it's not much! *Kind of lazy, though*. And certainly not good enough in 2016.

It seems, syndicating your content via RSS and encouraging folk to republish your content will get you links, that count, on some level it seems (which might be useful for longer tail searches). I still always make sure even duplicate (in essence) press releases and articles we publish are 'unique' at some level.

Google is quite good at identifying the original article especially if the site it's published on has a measure of trust – I've never had a problem with syndication of my content via RSS and let others cross post.... but I do like at least a link back, [nofollow](#) or not.



"I think that Internal Navigation is of paramount importance "

Search

About 1,270 results (0.35 seconds)

Advanced search

Everything

More

The web

Pages from the UK

More search tools

[What Is SEO? Beginner's Guide to Search Engine Optimisation Tips ...](#)

19 Nov 2007 ... I think that Internal Navigation is of paramount importance. Google needs links to find your pages. Don't underestimate the value of a ...
[www.hobo-web.co.uk/seo-blog/what-is-seo-a-guide-for-beginners/](#) - [Cached](#)

[USA: What Is SEO? Beginner's Guide to Search Engine Optimisation ...](#)

9 Jun 2010 ... I think that Internal Navigation is of paramount importance. Google needs links to find your pages. Don't underestimate the value of a ...
[www.muamat.com/?view=showevent&date=2010-06...](#) - [Cached](#)

[Washington, USA: What Is SEO? Beginner's Guide to Search Engine ...](#)

I think that Internal Navigation is of paramount importance. Google needs ...
[www.muamat.com/.../9215_What_Is_SEO_Beginner_s_Guide_to_Search_Engine_Optimisation.html](#) - [Cached](#)

[Washington, USA: What Is SEO? Beginner's Guide to Search Engine ...](#)

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[www.muamat.com/.../9215_What_Is_SEO_Beginner_s_Guide_to_Search_Engine_Optimisation.html](#) - [Cached](#)

[Show more results from muamat.com](#)

[dunya.com.pk](#)

I think that Internal Navigation is of paramount importance. Google needs links to find your pages. Don't underestimate the value of a clever internal ...
[www.dunya.com.pk/blogs](#) - [Cached](#)

[SoulCast - What Is SEO? Beginner's Guide to Search Engine Optimisation](#)

I think that Internal Navigation is of paramount importance. Google needs links to find your pages. Don't underestimate the value of a ...
[www.soulcast.com/.../What-Is-SEO%3F-Beginner's-Guide-to-Search-Engine-Optimisation](#) - [Cached](#)

[Advogato: Blog for gogeshop](#)

8 Sep 2010 ... I think that Internal Navigation is of paramount importance. Google needs

The bigger problem with content syndication in 2016 is unnatural links and whether or not Google classifies your intent as manipulative.

Thin Content Classifier

Google also says about ‘thin’ content.

Avoid publishing stubs: Users don’t like seeing “empty” pages, so avoid placeholders where possible. For example, don’t publish pages for which you don’t yet have real content. If you do create placeholder pages, use the noindex meta tag to block these pages from being indexed.

and

Minimize similar content: If you have many pages that are similar, consider expanding each page or consolidating the pages into one. For instance, if you have a travel site with separate pages for two cities, but the same information on both pages, you could either merge the pages into one page about both cities or you could expand each page to contain unique content about each city.

The key takeaways about duplicate content are this.

Duplicate content is a normal churn of the web. Google will rank it – for a time. Human or machine generated, there is a lot of it – and Google has a lot of experience handling it and there are many circumstances where Google finds duplicate content on websites. Not all duplicate content is a bad thing.

If a page ranks well and Google finds it a manipulative use of duplicate content, Google can demote the page if it wants to. If it is deemed the intent is manipulative and low-quality with no value add, Google can take action on it – using manual or algorithmic actions.

There is a very thin line between reasonable duplicate content and thin content. This is where the confusion comes in.

Google explicitly states they don’t have a duplicate content penalty – but they do have a ‘thin content’ manual action... that looks and feels a lot like a penalty. They also have Google Panda.

Google Panda

A part of Google Panda algorithm is focused on thin pages and ratio of good quality content to low-quality content on a site. In the original announcement about Google Panda we were specifically told that the following was a ‘bad’ thing:

Does the site have duplicate, overlapping, or redundant articles?

If Google is rating your pages on content quality, or lack of it, as we are told, *and* user signals – on some level – and a lot of your site is duplicate content that gets no user signal – then that may be a problem too.

Google offers some advice on thin pages (emphasis mine):

Here are a few common examples of pages that often have thin content with little or no added value: 1. Automatically generated content, 2. Thin affiliate pages 3. **Content from other sources**. For example: **Scraped content** or **low-quality guest blog posts**. 4. **Doorway pages**

Everything I’ve bolded in the last two quotes is essentially *about* duplicate content.

Google is, even more, explicit when it tells you how to clean up this ‘violation’:

Next, follow the steps below to identify and correct the violation(s) on your site: **Check for content on your site that duplicates content found elsewhere**.

So beware. Google says there is NO duplicate content penalty, but if Google classifies your duplicate content as thin content or boilerplate, spun text, then you DO have a problem!

A **serious problem** if your entire site is built like that.

And how Google rates thin pages changes over time, with a quality bar that is always going to rise and that your pages need to keep up with.

Especially if rehashing content is what you do.

TIP – Look out for soft 404 errors in Google webmaster tools as examples of pages Google are classing as low-quality, user unfriendly thin pages.

More reading

- <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/specify-your-canonical.html>
- <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/66359?hl=en>
- <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2009/10/reunifying-duplicate-content-on-your.html>

- <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/more-guidance-on-building-high-quality.html>
- <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/2604719?hl=en>
- <http://www.SEObythesea.com/2008/02/google-omits-needless-words-on-your-pages/>

When is the ‘Low’ And ‘Lowest’ Quality Rating Appropriate for a Website?

Google has a history of classifying your site as some type of entity, and whatever that is, you don’t want a *low-quality* label on it. Put there by algorithm or human. Manual evaluators might not directly impact your rankings, but any signal associated with Google marking your site as *low-quality* should probably be avoided.

If you are making websites to rank in Google without unnatural practices, you are going to have to meet Google’s expectations in the Quality Raters [Guidelines](#) (PDF).

Google says:

Low-quality pages are unsatisfying or lacking in some element that prevents them from achieving their purpose well.

‘Sufficient Reason’

There is ‘sufficient reason’ in some cases to immediately mark the page down on some areas, and Google directs quality raters to do so:

- An unsatisfying amount of MC is a sufficient reason to give a page a Low-quality rating.
- Low-quality MC is a sufficient reason to give a page a Low-quality rating.
- Lacking appropriate E-A-T is sufficient reason to give a page a Low-quality rating.
- Negative reputation is sufficient reason to give a page a Low-quality rating.

What are low-quality pages?

When it comes to defining what a low-quality page is, Google is evidently VERY interested in the quality of the Main Content (MC) of a page:

Main Content (MC)

Google says MC should be the ‘*main reason a page exists*’.

- The quality of the MC is low.
- There is an unsatisfying amount of MC for the purpose of the page.
- There is an unsatisfying amount of website information.

POOR MC & POOR USER EXPERIENCE

- This content has many problems: [poor spelling and grammar, complete lack of editing](#), inaccurate information. The poor quality of the MC is a reason for the Lowest+ to Low rating. In addition, the popover ads (the words that are double underlined in blue) can make the main content difficult to read, resulting in a poor user experience.
- Pages that provide a [poor user experience](#), such as pages that try to download malicious software, should also receive low ratings, even if they have some images appropriate for the query.

DESIGN FOCUS NOT ON MC

- If a page seems poorly designed, take a good look. Ask yourself if the page was deliberately designed to draw attention away from the MC. If so, the Low rating is appropriate.
- The page design is lacking. For example, the page layout or use of space distracts from the MC, making it difficult to use the MC.

MC LACK OF AUTHOR EXPERTISE

- You should consider who is responsible for the content of the website or content of the page you are evaluating. Does the person or organization have sufficient expertise for the topic? If expertise, authoritativeness, or trustworthiness is lacking, use the Low rating.
- There is no evidence that the author has medical expertise. Because this is a YMYL medical article, lacking expertise is a reason for a Low rating.
- The author of the page or website does not have enough expertise for the topic of the page and/or the website is not trustworthy or authoritative for the topic. In other words, the page/website is lacking E-A-T.

After page content, the following are given the most weight in determining if you have a high-quality page.

POOR SECONDARY CONTENT

- Unhelpful or distracting SC that benefits the website rather than helping the user is a reason for a Low rating.
- The SC is distracting or unhelpful for the purpose of the page.
- The page is lacking helpful SC.
- For large websites, SC may be one of the primary ways that users explore the website and find MC, and a lack of helpful SC on large websites with a lot of content may be a reason for a Low rating

DISTRACTING ADVERTISEMENTS

- For example, an ad for a model in a revealing bikini is probably acceptable on a site that sells bathing suits, however, an extremely distracting and graphic porn ad may warrant a Low rating.

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

- If the website feels inadequately updated and inadequately maintained for its purpose, the Low rating is probably warranted.
- The website is lacking maintenance and updates.

SERP SENTIMENT & NEGATIVE REVIEWS

- Credible negative (though not malicious or financially fraudulent) reputation is a reason for a Low rating, especially for a YMYL page.
- The website has a negative reputation.

LOWEST RATING

When it comes to Google assigning your page the lowest rating, you are probably going to have to go some to hit this, but it gives you a direction you want to ensure you avoid at all costs.

Google says throughout the document, that there are certain pages that...

should always receive the Lowest rating

..and these are presented below. Note – These statements below are spread throughout the raters document and not listed the way I have listed them there. I don't think any context is lost presenting them like this, and it makes it more digestible.

Anyone familiar with Google Webmaster Guidelines will be familiar with most of the following:

- True lack of purpose pages or websites.
 - Sometimes it is difficult to determine the real purpose of a page.
- Pages on YMYL websites with completely inadequate or no website information.
- Pages or websites that are created to make money with little to no attempt to help users.
- Pages with extremely low or lowest quality MC.
 - If a page is deliberately created with no MC, use the Lowest rating. Why would a page exist without MC? Pages with no MC are usually lack of purpose pages or deceptive pages.
 - Webpages that are deliberately created with a bare minimum of MC, or with MC which is completely unhelpful for the purpose of the page, should be considered to have no MC
 - Pages deliberately created with no MC should be rated Lowest.
 - Important: The Lowest rating is appropriate if all or almost all of the MC on the page is copied with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users. Such pages should be rated Lowest, even if the page assigns credit for the content to another source. Important: The Lowest rating is appropriate if all or almost all of the MC on the page is copied with little or no time, effort, expertise, manual curation, or added value for users. Such pages should be rated Lowest, even if the page assigns credit for the content to another source.
- Pages on YMYL (*Your Money Or Your Life* Transaction pages) websites with completely inadequate or no website information.
- Pages on abandoned, hacked, or defaced websites.

- Pages or websites created with no expertise or pages that are highly untrustworthy, unreliable, unauthoritative, inaccurate, or misleading.
- Harmful or malicious pages or websites.
 - Websites that have extremely negative or malicious reputations. Also use the Lowest rating for violations of the [Google Webmaster Quality Guidelines](#). Finally, Lowest+ may be used both for pages with many low-quality characteristics and for pages whose lack of a single Page Quality characteristic makes you question the true purpose of the page. Important: Negative reputation is sufficient reason to give a page a Low quality rating. Evidence of truly malicious or fraudulent behavior warrants the Lowest rating.
 - Deceptive pages or websites. Deceptive webpages appear to have a helpful purpose (the stated purpose), but are actually created for some other reason. Use the Lowest rating if a webpage page is deliberately created to deceive and potentially harm users in order to benefit the website.
 - Some pages are designed to manipulate users into clicking on certain types of links through visual design elements, such as page layout, organization, link placement, font colour, images, etc. We will consider these kinds of pages to have deceptive page design. Use the Lowest rating if the page is deliberately designed to manipulate users to click on Ads, monetized links, or suspect download links with little or no effort to provide helpful MC.
 - Sometimes, pages just don't "feel" trustworthy. Use the Lowest rating for any of the following: Pages or websites which you strongly suspect are scams
 - Pages, which ask for personal information without a legitimate reason (for example, pages which ask for name, birthdate, address, bank account, government ID number, etc.). Websites which "phish" for passwords to Facebook, Gmail, or other popular online services. See here for information about "phishing" fraud. Pages with suspicious download links, which may be malware.
- Use the Lowest rating for websites with extremely negative reputations.

Websites ‘Lacking Care and Maintenance’ Are Rated ‘Low Quality’.

Sometimes a website may seem a little neglected: links may be broken, images may not load, and content may feel stale or out-dated. If the website feels inadequately updated and inadequately maintained for its purpose, the Low rating is probably warranted.

“Broken” or Non-Functioning Pages Classed As Low Quality

I touched on 404 pages in my recent post about [investigating why has a site lost traffic](#).

Google gives clear advice on creating useful 404 pages:

1. *Tell visitors clearly that the page they’re looking for can’t be found*
2. *Use language that is friendly and inviting*
3. *Make sure your 404 page uses the same look and feel (including navigation) as the rest of your site.*
4. *Consider adding links to your most popular articles or posts, as well as a link to your site’s home page.*
5. *Think about providing a way for users to report a broken link.*
6. *Make sure that your webserver returns an actual 404 HTTP status code when a missing page is requested*

Ratings for Pages with Error Messages or No MC

Google doesn't want to index pages without a specific purpose or sufficient main content. A good 404 page and proper setup prevents a lot of this from happening in the first place.

*Some pages load with content created by the webmaster, but have an error message or are missing MC. Pages may lack MC for various reasons. Sometimes, the page is "broken" and the content does not load properly or at all. Sometimes, the content is no longer available and the page displays an error message with this information. **Many websites have a few "broken" or non-functioning pages. This is normal, and those individual non-functioning or broken pages on an otherwise maintained site should be rated Low quality. This is true even if other pages on the website are overall High or Highest quality.***

Does Google programmatically look at 404 pages?

We are told, NO in this recent hangout – – but – in Quality Raters Guidelines “Users probably care a lot”.

Do 404 Errors in Search Console Hurt My Rankings?

404 errors on invalid URLs do *not* harm your site’s indexing or ranking in any way.
JOHN MEULLER

It appears this isn’t a once size fits all answer. If you properly deal with mishandled 404 errors that have some link equity, you reconnect equity that was once lost – and this ‘backlink reclamation’ evidently has value.

The issue here is that Google introduces a lot of noise into that Crawl Errors report to make it unwieldy and not very user-friendly.

A lot of broken links Google tells you about can often be totally irrelevant and legacy issues. Google could make it instantly more valuable by telling us which 404s are linked to from only *external* websites.

Fortunately, you can find your own broken links on site using the myriad of [SEO tools](#) available.

I also prefer to use Analytics to look for broken backlinks on a site with some history of migrations, for instance.

I also use Google Analytics to look for broken backlinks on a site with some history of migrations, for instance.

John has clarified some of this before, although he is talking specifically (I think) about errors found by Google in Search Console (formerly Google Webmaster Tools):

1. *In some cases, crawl errors may come from a legitimate structural issue within your website or CMS. How do you tell? Double-check the origin of the crawl error. If there’s a broken link on your site, in your page’s static HTML, then that’s always worth fixing*
2. *What about the funky URLs that are “clearly broken?” When our algorithms like your site, they may try to find more great content on it, for example by trying to discover new URLs in JavaScript. If we try those “URLs” and find a 404, that’s great and expected. We just don’t want to miss anything important*

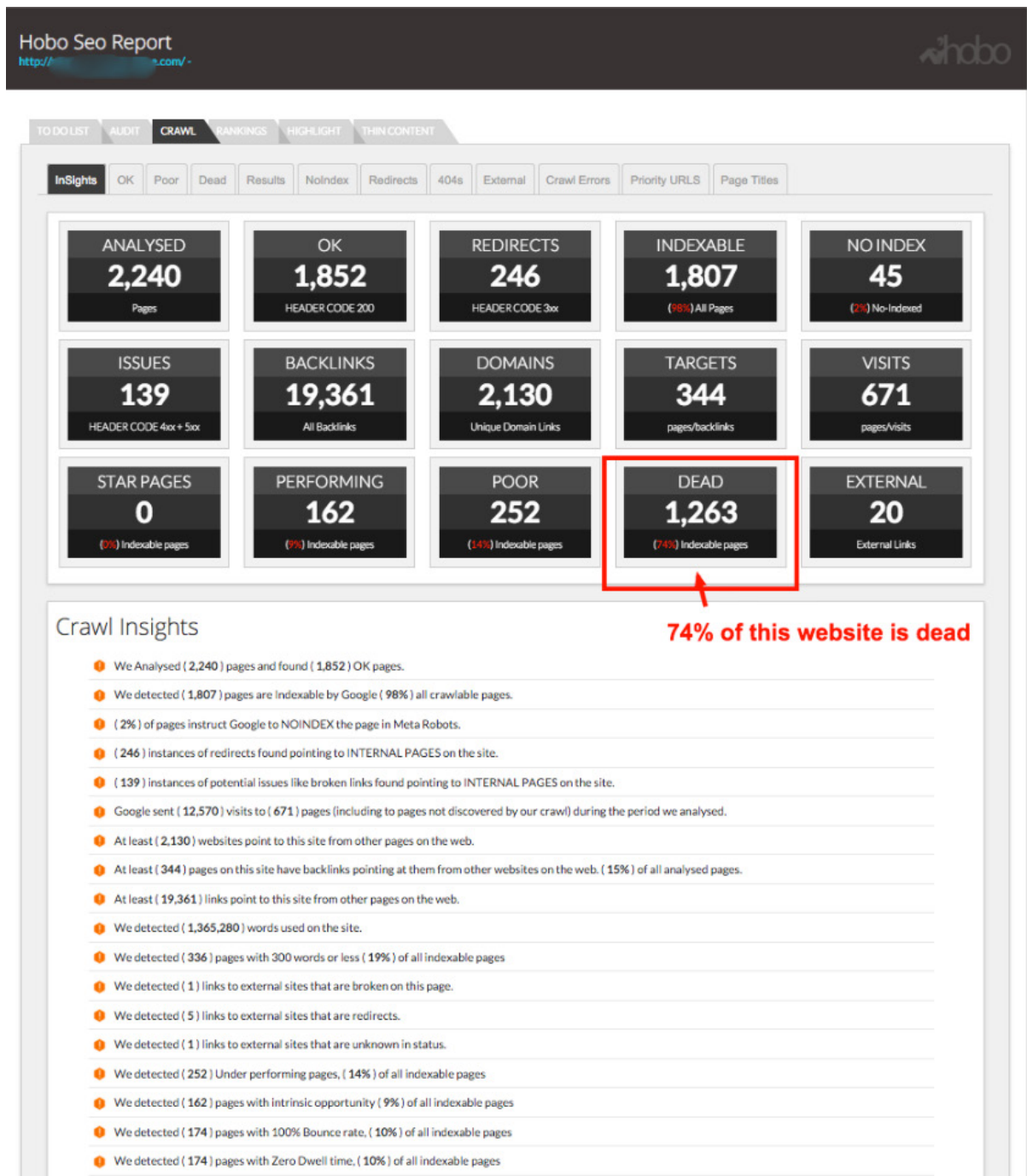
If you are making websites and want them to rank, the 2015 and 2014 Quality Raters Guidelines document is a great guide for webmasters to avoid low-quality ratings and potentially avoid punishment algorithms.

If you are pushing for high-quality pages, avoid everything you see in this page.

Further Reading

- [Investigating A Website Traffic Drop](#)
- [Dealing With Low Quality Pages On A Website](#)
- [Example of a High Quality Webpage](#)
- [User Experience As A Ranking Factor](#)
- [Making High Quality Websites](#)

Identifying Which Pages On Your Own Site Hurt Or Help Your Rankings



Separating the wheat from the chaff.

Being ‘indexed’ is important. If a page isn’t indexed, the page can’t be returned by Google in Search Engine Results Pages.

While getting as many pages indexed in Google was historically a priority for a SEO, Google is now rating the quality of pages on your site and the type of pages it is indexing. So bulk indexation is no guarantee of success – in fact, it’s a risk in 2016 to index all pages on your site, especially if you have a large, sprawling site.

If you have a lot of low-quality pages (URLs) indexed on your site compared to high-quality pages (URLs).... Google has told us it is marking certain sites down for that.

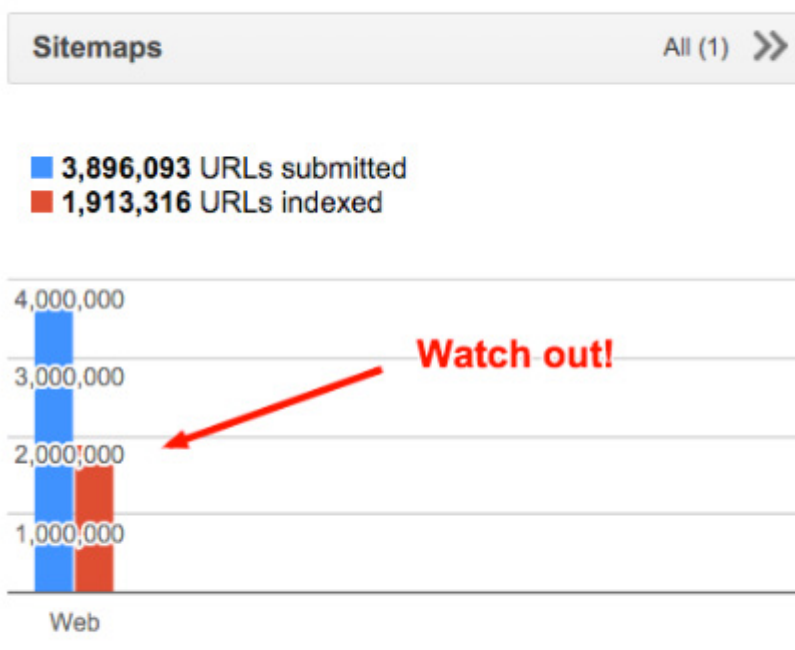
Some URLs are just not welcome to be indexed as part of your website content anymore.

Do I need to know which pages are indexed?

No. Knowing is useful, of course, but largely unnecessary. Indexation is never a guarantee of traffic.

Some SEO would tend to scrape Google to get indexation data on a website. I've never bothered with that. Most sites I work with have xml sitemap files, so an obvious place to start to look at such issues is **Google Search Console**.

Google will tell you how many pages you have submitted in a sitemap, and how many pages are indexed. It will not tell you which pages are indexed, but if there is a LARGE discrepancy between SUBMITTED and INDEXED, it's very much worth digging deeper.



If Google is de-indexing large swaths of your content that you have actually submitted as part of an xml sitemap, then a problem is often afoot.

Unfortunately with this method, you don't get to see the pages produced by the CMS out with the xml sitemap – so this is not a full picture of the 'health' of your website.

Identifying Dead Pages

I usually start with a performance analysis that involves **merging data from a physical crawl of a website with analytics data and webmaster tools data**. A content type analysis will identify the type of pages the cms generates. A content performance analysis will gauge how well each section of the site performs.

If you have 100,000 pages on a site, and only 1,000 pages get organic traffic from Google over a 3-6 month period – you can make the argument 99% of the site is rated as ‘crap’ (at least as far as Google rates pages these days).

I group pages like these together as ‘**dead pages**’ for further analysis. *Deadweight*, ‘dead’ for short.

The thinking is if the pages were high-quality, they would be getting *some* kind of organic traffic.

Identifying which pages receive no organic visitors over a sensible timeframe is a quick, if noisy, way to separate pages that obviously **WORK** from pages that **DONT** – and will help you clean up a large portion of redundant URLs on the site.

It helps to see page performance in the context of longer timeframes as some types of content can be seasonal, for instance, and produce false positives over a shorter timescale. It is important to trim content pages carefully – and there are nuances.

False Positives

Experience can educate you when a page is high-quality and yet receives no traffic. If the page is thin, but is not manipulative, is indeed ‘unique’ and delivers on a purpose with little obvious detectable reason to mark it down, then you can say it is a high-quality page – just with very little *search* demand for it. Ignored content is not the same as ‘toxic’ content.

False positives aside, **once you identify the pages receiving no traffic, you very largely isolate the type of pages on your site that Google doesn’t rate** – for whatever reason. A strategy for these pages can then be developed.

Identifying Content That Can Potentially Hurt Your Rankings

As you review the pages, you're probably going to find pages that include:

- out of date, overlapping or irrelevant content
- collections of pages not paginated properly
- index able pages that shouldn't be indexed
- stub pages
- indexed search pages
- pages with malformed HTML and broken images
- auto generated pages with little value

You will probably find 'dead' pages you didn't even know your cms produced (hence why an actual crawl of your site is required, rather than just working from a list of URLs from a xml sitemap, for instance).

Those pages need cleaned up, Google has said. And remaining pages should:

'stand on their own' J.Mueller

Google doesn't like auto generated pages in 2016, so you don't want Google indexing these pages in a normal fashion. Judicious use of noindex, follow directive in robots meta tags, and sensible use of the canonical link element are *required implementation* on most sites I see these days.

The aim in 2016 is to have as few 'low-quality pages on a site as possible, using as few *aged* SEO techniques as possible.

The pages that remain after a URL clear-out, can be reworked and improved.

In fact – they **MUST BE** improved if you are to win more rankings and get more Google organic traffic in future.

This is time-consuming – just like Google wants it to be. You need to review DEAD pages with a forensic eye and ask:

- Are these pages high-quality and very relevant to a search term?
- Do these pages duplicate content on the pages on the site?
- Are these pages automatically generated, with little or no unique text content on them?
- Is the purpose of this page met **WITHOUT** sending visitors to another page e.g. doorway pages?
- Will these pages ever pick up natural links?
- Is the intent of these pages to inform first? (or profit from organic traffic through advertising?)

- Are these pages FAR superior than the competition in Google presently for the search term you want to rank? This is actually very important.

If the answer to any of the above is NO – then it is imperative you take action to minimise the amount of these types of pages on your site.

What about DEAD pages with incoming backlinks or a lot of text content?

Bingo! Use 301 redirects (or use canonical link elements) to redirect any asset you have with some value to Googlebot to **equivalent, up to date** sections on your site. Do NOT just redirect these pages to your homepage.

Rework available content before you bin it

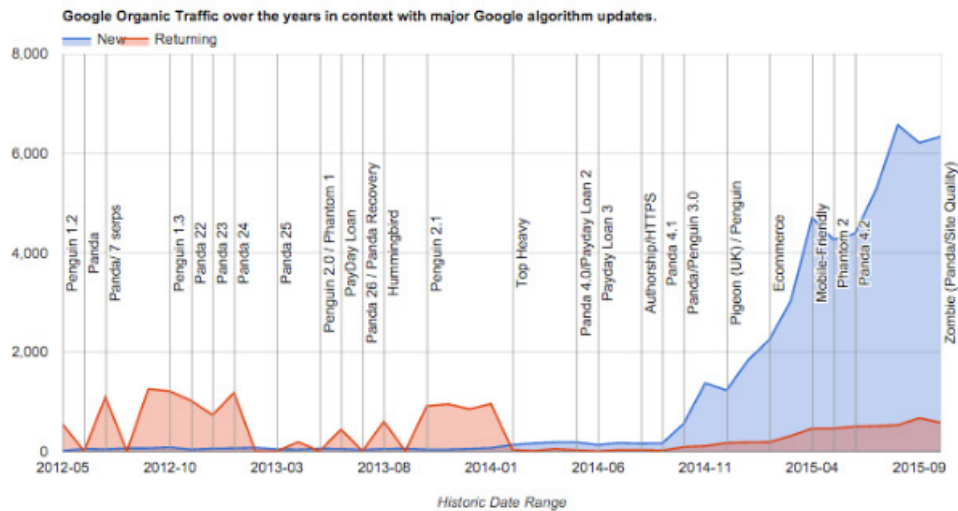
High-quality content is expensive – so rework content when it is available. Medium quality content can always be made higher quality – in fact – a page is hardly ever finished in 2016. EXPECT to come back to your articles every six months to improve them to keep them moving in the right direction.

Sensible grouping of content types across the site can often leave you with substantial text content that can be reused and repackaged in a way that the same content originally spread over multiple pages, now consolidated into one page reworked and shaped around a topic, has a considerably much more successful time of it in Google SERPs in 2016.

Well, it does if the page you make is *useful* and has a purpose *other* than *just* to make money.

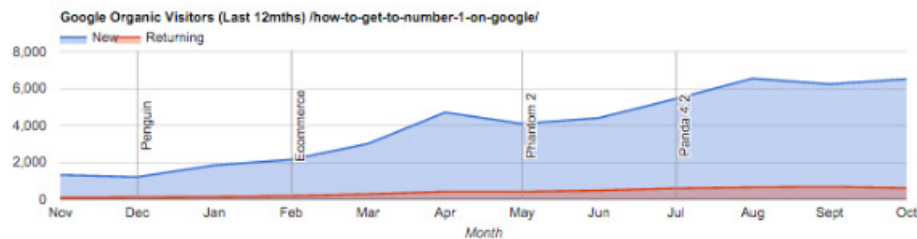
Historic URL Trend

(50,372) New Visitors
(4,983) Returning Visitors



Last 12 Months

(47,437) New Visitors
(4,803) Returning Visitors



<p>VISITS YEAR SO FAR</p> <p>2,947 v 51,014</p> <p>1,631.05% ↑</p> <p>Traffic this year so far, vs the same period last YEAR</p>	<p>VISITS MONTH V MONTH</p> <p>758 v 3,550</p> <p>368.34% ↑</p> <p>Traffic this month, vs the same period last YEAR</p>	<p>VISITS LAST MONTH V THIS MONTH</p> <p>3,645 v 3,550</p> <p>-2.61% ↓</p> <p>Traffic this month, vs the same period last month</p>
<p>GOALS MONTH V MONTH</p> <p>0 v 6</p> <p>0.00% —</p> <p>this month, vs last year</p>	<p>GOALS MONTH V LAST MONTH</p> <p>2 v 6</p> <p>200.00% ↑</p> <p>this month so far, vs last month same period</p>	<p>GOALS YEAR V LAST YEAR</p> <p>33 v 66</p> <p>100.00% ↑</p> <p>this year, vs last year</p>

REMEMBER – DEAD PAGES are only one aspect of a site review. There's going to be a large percentage of any site that gets a little organic traffic but still severely underperforms, too – tomorrows DEAD pages. I call these POOR pages in my reviews.

Minimise Low-Quality Content & Overlapping Text Content

Google may well be able to recognise ‘low-quality’ a lot better than it does ‘high-quality’ – so having a lot of ‘low-quality’ pages on your site is potentially what you are actually going to be rated on (if it makes up most of your site) – now, or in the future. NOT your high-quality content.

This is more or less explained by Google spokespeople like John Mueller. He is constantly on about ‘folding’ thin pages together, these days (and I can say that certainly has a positive impact on many sites).

While his advice in this instance might be specifically about UGC (user generated content like forums) – I am more interested in what he has to say when he talks about the algorithm looking at the site “overall” and how it ‘thinks’ when it finds a mixture of high-quality pages and low-quality pages.

And Google has clearly said in print:

low-quality content on part of a site can impact a site’s ranking as a whole

Avoid Google's punitive algorithms

Fortunately, we don't actually need to know and fully understand the ins-and-outs of Google's algorithms to know what the best course of action is.

The sensible thing in light of Google's punitive algorithms is just to **not let Google index (or more accurately, rate) low-quality pages on your site. And certainly – stop publishing new 'thin' pages.** Don't put your site at risk.

If pages get no organic traffic anyway, are out-of-date for instance, and improving them would take a lot of effort and expense, why let Google index them normally, if by rating them it impacts your overall score? Clearing away the low-quality stuff lets you focus on building better stuff on other pages that Google will rank in 2016 and beyond.

Ideally you would have a giant site and every page would be high-quality – but that's not practical.

A myth is that pages need a lot of text to rank. They don't, but a lot of people still try to make text bulkier and unique page to page.

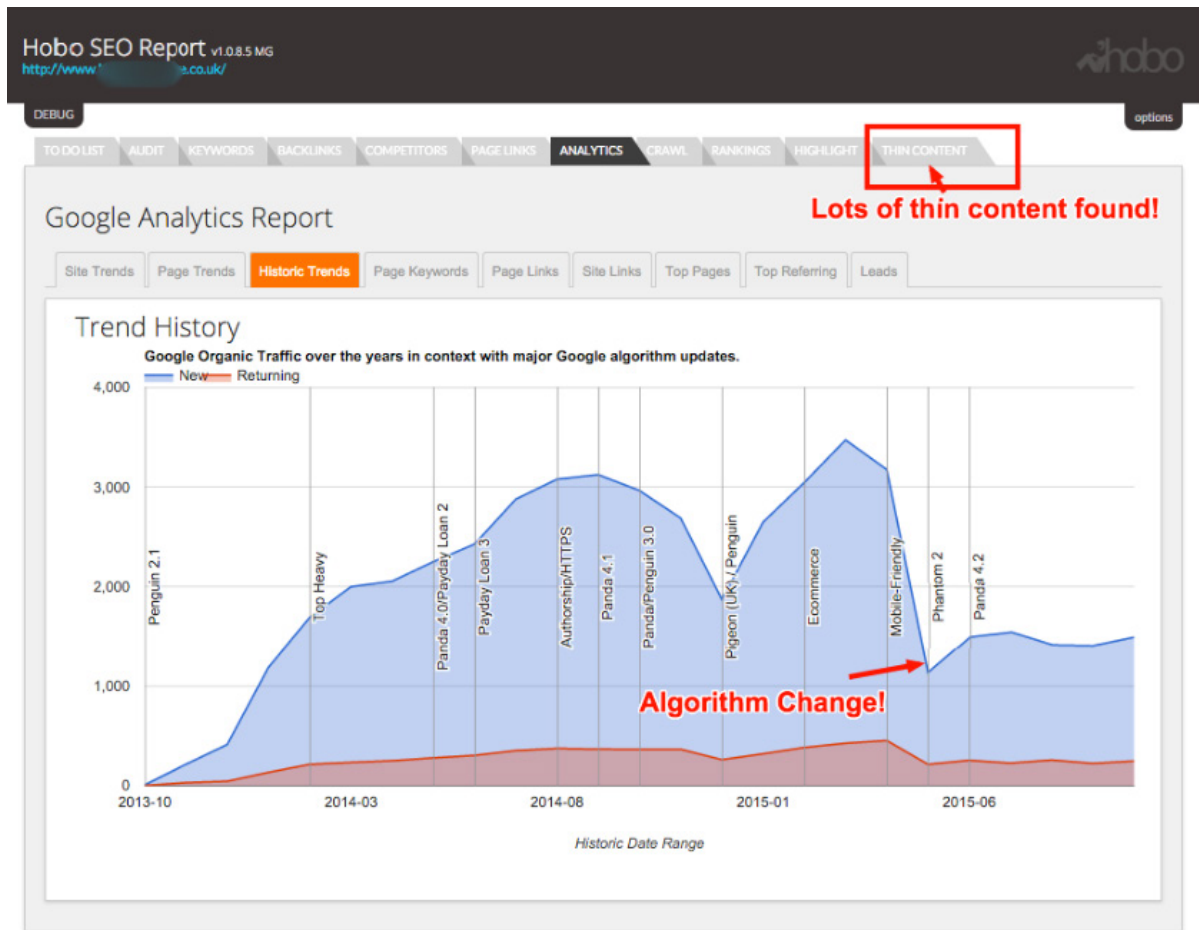
While that theory is sound (when focused on a single page, when the intent is to deliver utility content to a Google user) using old school SEO techniques on especially a large site spread out across many pages seems to amplify site quality problems, after recent algorithm changes, and so this type of optimisation without keeping an eye on overall site quality is self-defeating in the long run.

If you want assistance with this type of analysis for your own website, email [me here](#) or you can [buy a review of your website online here](#).

More reading

1. <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/google-panda-making-high-quality-websites-in-2015/>
2. <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/2604719?hl=en>
3. <http://blog.searchmetrics.com/us/2014/09/23/5-ways-to-definitely-get-hit-by-a-panda-algorithm-penalty/>
4. <http://searchengineland.com/google-panda-4-2-is-here-slowly-rolling-out-after-waiting-almost-10-months-225850>
5. <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/traffic-crunch/>

Investigating A Traffic Crunch



Every site is impacted by how highly Google rates it.

There are many reasons a website loses traffic from Google. Server changes, website problems, content changes, downtimes, redesigns, migrations... the list is extensive.

Sometimes, Google turns up the dial on demands on 'quality', and if your site falls short, a website traffic crunch is assured. Some sites invite problems ignoring Google's 'rules' and some sites inadvertently introduce technical problems to their site after the date of a major algorithm update, and are then impacted negatively by later refreshes of the algorithm.

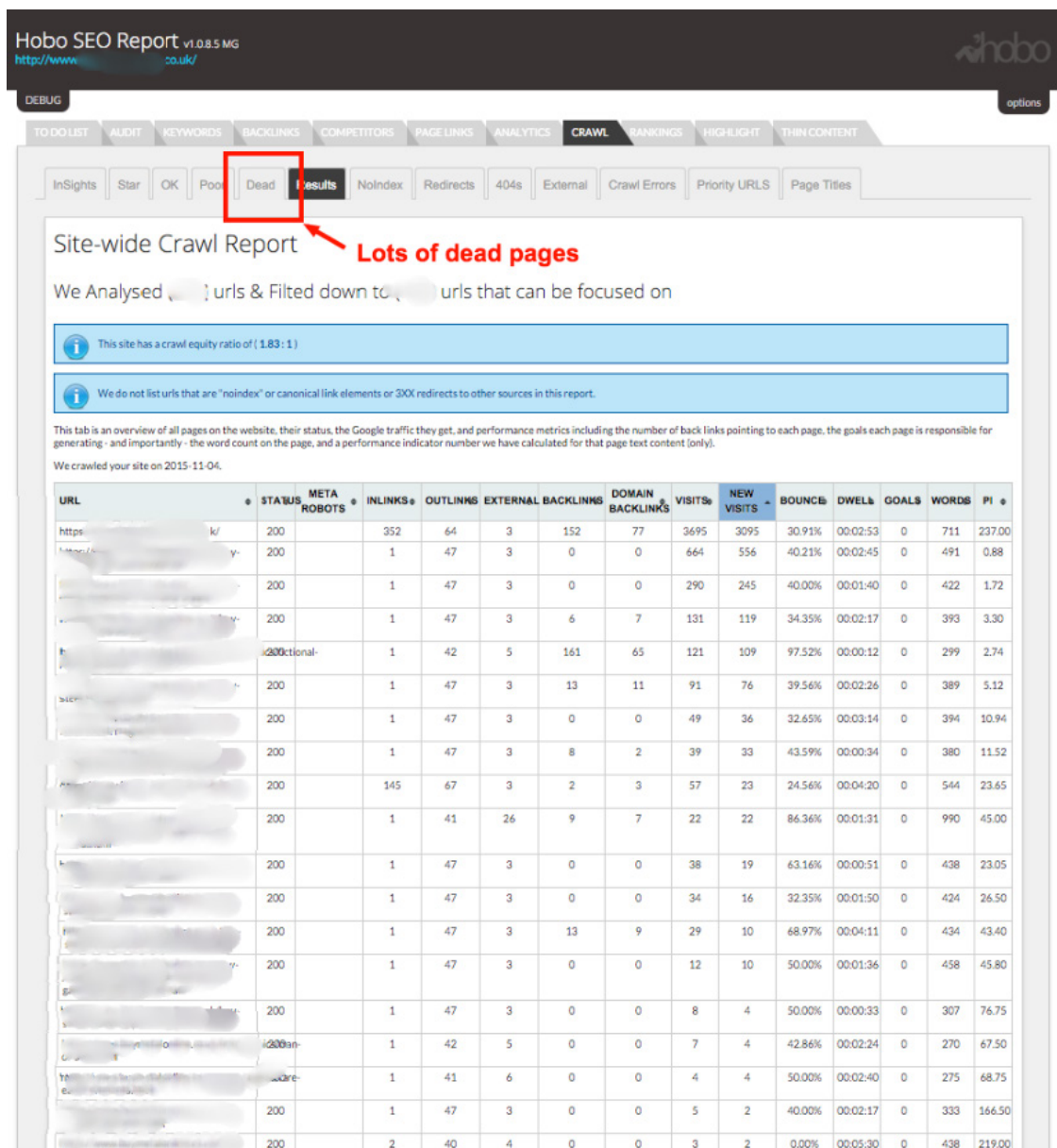
Comparing your Google Analytics data side by side with the dates of official algorithm updates is useful in diagnosing a site health issue or traffic drop. In the above example, the client thought it was a switch to HTTPS and server downtime that caused the drop when it was actually the *May 6 2015 Google Quality Algorithm* (originally called Phantom 2 in some circles) that caused the sudden drop in organic traffic.

Thin Content

A quick check of how the site was laid out soon uncovered a lot of unnecessary pages, or what Google calls thin, overlapping content. This observation would go a long way to confirming that the traffic drop was indeed caused by the May algorithm change.

Another obvious way to gauge the health of a site is to see which pages on the site get zero traffic from Google over a certain period of time. I do this by merging analytics data with crawl data – as analytics doesn't give you data on pages it sends no traffic to.

Often, this process can highlight low-quality pages on a site.



Hobo SEO Report v1.0.8.5 MG
http://www.hobo.co.uk/

DEBUG options

TO DO LIST AUDIT KEYWORDS BACKLINKS COMPETITORS PAGE LINKS ANALYTICS CRAWL RANKINGS HIGHLIGHT THIN CONTENT

InSights Star OK Poor Dead **Results** NoIndex Redirects 404s External Crawl Errors Priority URLs Page Titles

Site-wide Crawl Report **Lots of dead pages**

We Analysed 1000 urls & Filtered down to 100 urls that can be focused on

This site has a crawl equity ratio of (1.83:1)

We do not list urls that are "noindex" or canonical link elements or 30X redirects to other sources in this report.

This tab is an overview of all pages on the website, their status, the Google traffic they get, and performance metrics including the number of back links pointing to each page, the goals each page is responsible for generating - and importantly - the word count on the page, and a performance indicator number we have calculated for that page text content [only].

We crawled your site on 2015-11-04.

URL	STATUS	META ROBOTS	INLINKS	OUTLINKS	EXTERNAL	BACKLINKS	DOMAIN BACKLINKS	VISITS	NEW VISITS	BOUNCE	DWELL	GOALS	WORDS	PI
https://www.hobo.co.uk/	200		352	64	3	152	77	3695	3095	30.91%	00:02:53	0	711	237.00
https://www.hobo.co.uk/about-us	200		1	47	3	0	0	664	556	40.21%	00:02:45	0	491	0.88
https://www.hobo.co.uk/contact-us	200		1	47	3	0	0	290	245	40.00%	00:01:40	0	422	1.72
https://www.hobo.co.uk/services	200		1	47	3	6	7	131	119	34.35%	00:02:17	0	393	3.30
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	42	5	161	65	121	109	97.52%	00:00:12	0	299	2.74
https://www.hobo.co.uk/sales	200		1	47	3	13	11	91	76	39.56%	00:02:26	0	389	5.12
https://www.hobo.co.uk/sales-representatives	200		1	47	3	0	0	49	36	32.65%	00:03:14	0	394	10.94
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	47	3	8	2	39	33	43.59%	00:00:34	0	380	11.52
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		145	67	3	2	3	57	23	24.56%	00:04:20	0	544	23.65
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	41	26	9	7	22	22	86.36%	00:01:31	0	990	45.00
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	47	3	0	0	38	19	63.16%	00:00:51	0	438	23.05
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	47	3	0	0	34	16	32.35%	00:01:50	0	424	26.50
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	47	3	13	9	29	10	68.97%	00:04:11	0	434	43.40
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	47	3	0	0	12	10	50.00%	00:01:36	0	458	45.80
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	47	3	0	0	8	4	50.00%	00:00:33	0	307	76.75
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	42	5	0	0	7	4	42.86%	00:02:24	0	270	67.50
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	41	6	0	0	4	4	50.00%	00:02:40	0	275	68.75
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		1	47	3	0	0	5	2	40.00%	00:02:17	0	333	166.50
https://www.hobo.co.uk/200-ton-trailers	200		2	40	4	0	0	3	2	0.00%	00:05:30	0	438	219.00

Google calls a lot of pages ‘thin’ or ‘overlapping’ content these days. I go into some of that in my [duplicate content penalty](#) post.

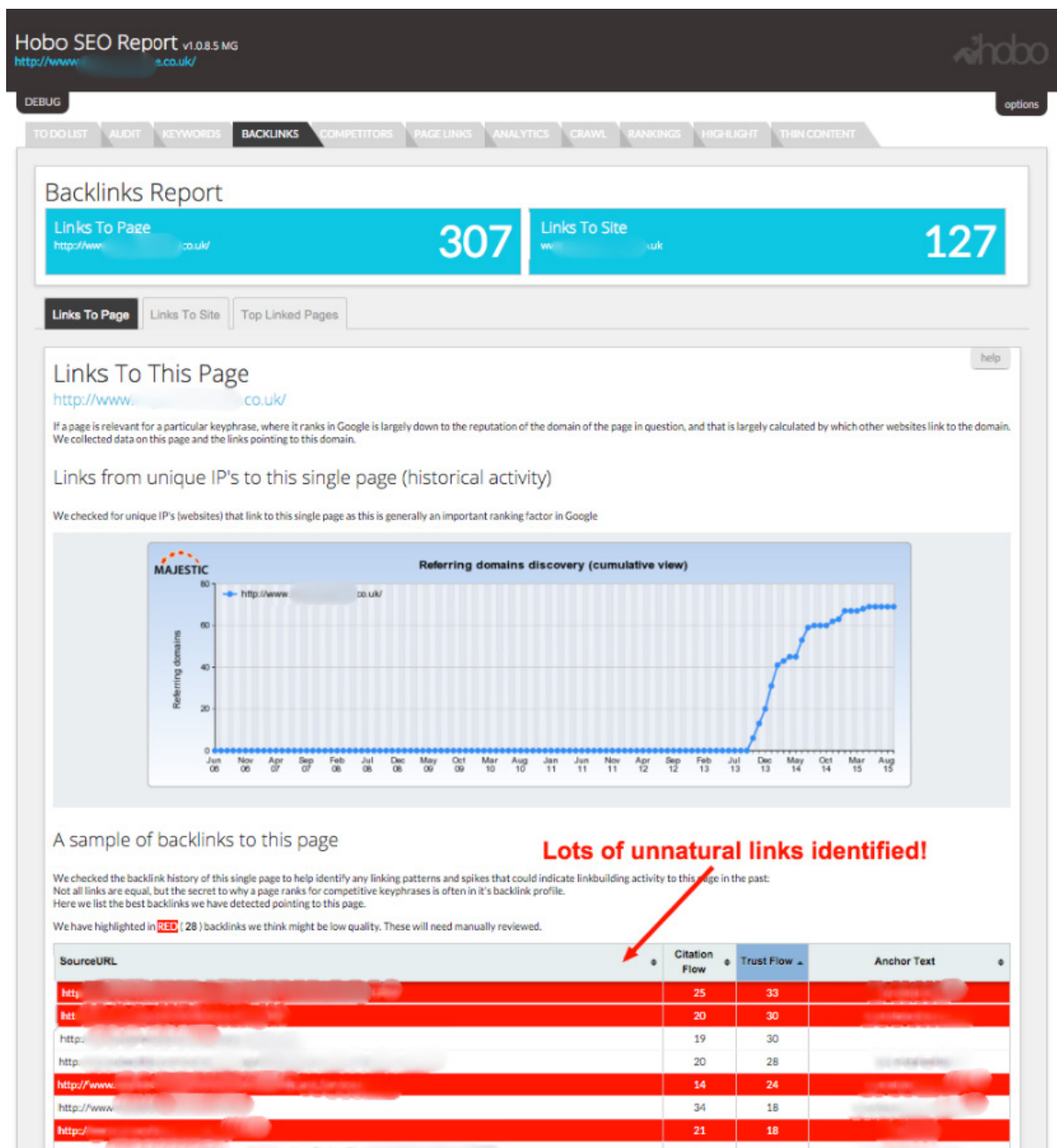
Algorithm Changes

Algorithm changes in 2016 seem to centre on reducing the effectiveness of old-school SEO techniques, with the *May 2015 Google 'Quality' algorithm update* bruisingly familiar. An algorithm change is usually akin to 'community service' for the business impacted negatively.

If your pages were designed to get the most out of Google, with commonly known and now outdated SEO techniques chances are Google has identified this and is throttling your rankings in some way. Google will continue to throttle rankings until you clean your pages up.

If Google thinks your links are manipulative, they want them cleaned up, too.

Actually – looking at the backlink profile of this customer, they are going to need a disavow file prepared too.



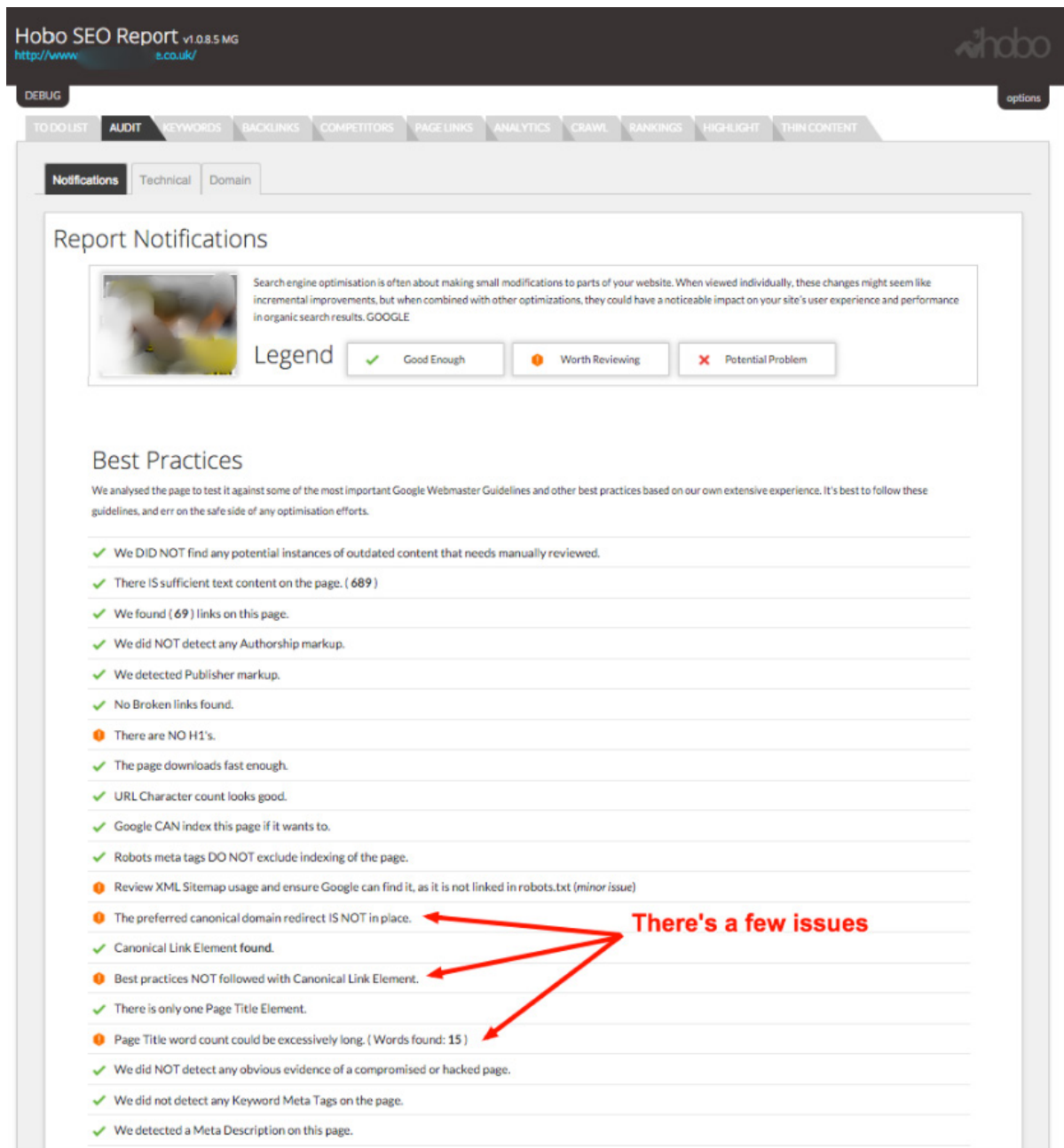
That is unsurprising in today's SEO climate.

What could be argued was 'highly relevant' or 'optimised' on-site SEO for Google just a few years ago is now being treated more like 'web spam' by punitive algorithms, rather than just 'over-optimisation'.

Google went through the SEO playbook and identified old techniques and use them against you today – meaning **every SEO job you take on always has a clean up aspect now.**

Google has left a very narrow band of opportunity when it comes to SEO – and punishments are designed to take you out of the game for some time while you clean up the infractions.

Technical Issues



The screenshot shows the Hobo SEO Report v1.0.8.5 MG interface. The top navigation bar includes tabs for TO DO LIST, AUDIT, KEYWORDS, BACKLINKS, COMPETITORS, PAGE LINKS, ANALYTICS, CRAWL, RANKINGS, HIGHLIGHT, and THIN CONTENT. The 'AUDIT' tab is selected, and the 'Notifications' sub-tab is active. The 'Report Notifications' section includes a legend with three categories: 'Good Enough' (green checkmark), 'Worth Reviewing' (orange exclamation mark), and 'Potential Problem' (red X). Below this, the 'Best Practices' section lists various guidelines. A red arrow points to the 'There's a few issues' text, which is positioned next to several items marked with orange exclamation marks: 'There are NO H1's', 'Review XML Sitemap usage and ensure Google can find it, as it is not linked in robots.txt (minor issue)', 'The preferred canonical domain redirect IS NOT in place.', 'Best practices NOT followed with Canonical Link Element.', and 'Page Title word count could be excessively long. (Words found: 15)'.

Report Notifications

Search engine optimisation is often about making small modifications to parts of your website. When viewed individually, these changes might seem like incremental improvements, but when combined with other optimizations, they could have a noticeable impact on your site's user experience and performance in organic search results. GOOGLE

Legend

- Good Enough
- Worth Reviewing
- Potential Problem

Best Practices

We analysed the page to test it against some of the most important Google Webmaster Guidelines and other best practices based on our own extensive experience. It's best to follow these guidelines, and err on the safe side of any optimisation efforts.

- ✓ We DID NOT find any potential instances of outdated content that needs manually reviewed.
- ✓ There IS sufficient text content on the page. (689)
- ✓ We found (69) links on this page.
- ✓ We did NOT detect any Authorship markup.
- ✓ We detected Publisher markup.
- ✓ No Broken links found.
- ⚠ There are NO H1's.
- ✓ The page downloads fast enough.
- ✓ URL Character count looks good.
- ✓ Google CAN index this page if it wants to.
- ✓ Robots meta tags DO NOT exclude indexing of the page.
- ⚠ Review XML Sitemap usage and ensure Google can find it, as it is not linked in robots.txt (minor issue)
- ⚠ The preferred canonical domain redirect IS NOT in place.
- ✓ Canonical Link Element found.
- ⚠ Best practices NOT followed with Canonical Link Element.
- ✓ There is only one Page Title Element.
- ⚠ Page Title word count could be excessively long. (Words found: 15)
- ✓ We did NOT detect any obvious evidence of a compromised or hacked page.
- ✓ We did not detect any Keyword Meta Tags on the page.
- ✓ We detected a Meta Description on this page.

There's a few issues

Google has a LONG list of technical requirements it advises you meet, on top of all the things it tells you NOT to do to optimise your website. Meeting Google's technical guidelines is no magic bullet to success – but failing to meet them can impact your rankings in the long run – and the odd technical issue can actually severely impact your entire site if rolled out across multiple pages.

The benefit of adhering to technical guidelines is often a second order benefit.

You don't get penalised, or filtered, when others do. When others fall, you rise.

Mostly – individual technical issues will not be the reason you have ranking problems, but they still need addressed for any second order benefit they provide.

Google spokespeople say 'user-experience' is NOT A RANKING FACTOR but this might be splitting hairs as lots of the rules are designed to guarantee a good a 'user experience' as possible for Google's users.

For instance, take good 404 pages. A poor 404 page and user interaction with it, can only lead to a 'poor user experience' signal at Google's end, for a number of reasons. I will highlight a poor 404 page in my audits and actually programmatically look for signs of this issue when I scan a site. I don't know if Google looks at your site that way to rate it e.g. algorithmically determines if you have a good 404 page – or if it is a UX factor, something to be taken into consideration further down the line – or purely to get you thinking about 404 pages (in general) to help prevent Google wasting resources indexing crud pages and presenting poor results to searchers. I think rather that any rating would be a second order scoring including data from user activity on the SERPs – stuff we as SEO can't see.

At any rate – I don't need to know why we need to do something, exactly, if it is in black and white like:

Create useful 404 pages

Tell visitors clearly that the page they're looking for can't be found. Use language that is friendly and inviting. Make sure your 404 page uses the same look and feel (including navigation) as the rest of your site. Consider adding links to your most popular articles or posts, as well as a link to your site's home page. Think about providing a way for users to report a broken link.

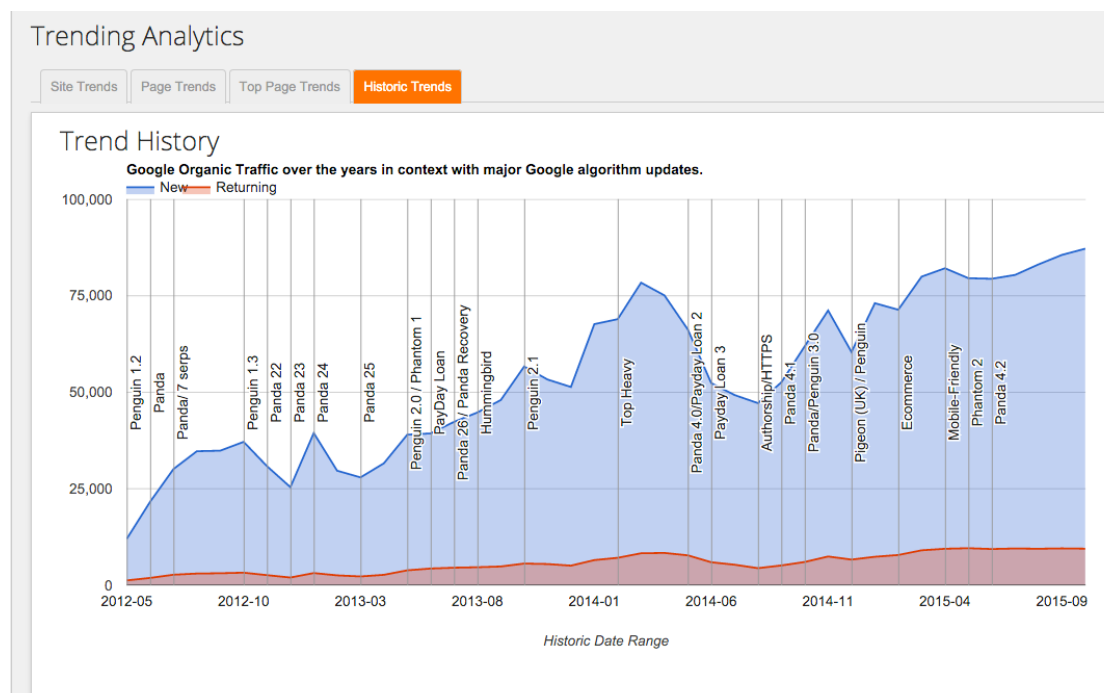
No matter how beautiful and useful your custom 404 page, you probably don't want it to appear in Google search results. In order to prevent 404 pages from being indexed by Google and other search engines, make sure that your webserver returns an actual 404 HTTP status code when a missing page is requested

..... all that is need doing is to follow the guideline as exact as Google tells you to do it.

Most of Google's technical guidelines can be interpreted in this way. And most need to be followed, whether addressing these issues has any immediate positive impact on the site or not.

Whether or not your site has been impacted in a noticeable way by these algorithms, every SEO project must start with a historical analysis of site performance. Every site has things to clean up and to optimise in a modern way.

The sooner you understand why Google is sending you less traffic than it did last year, the sooner you can clean it up and focus on proactive SEO that starts to impact your rankings in a positive way.



If you need help with this type of analysis for your website, [contact me here](#) or you can [purchase a review of your website here](#).

Further Reading

- [How To Clean Up Unnatural Links](#)
- [Google's Rules For Websites](#)
- [Create Useful 404 pages](#)
- [Google Quality Algorithm Update](#)
- [Completing a Search History Analysis](#)
- [List of Algorithm Changes](#)
- [Algorithm Change activity](#)

How Fast Should A Website Load?

People like fast sites.

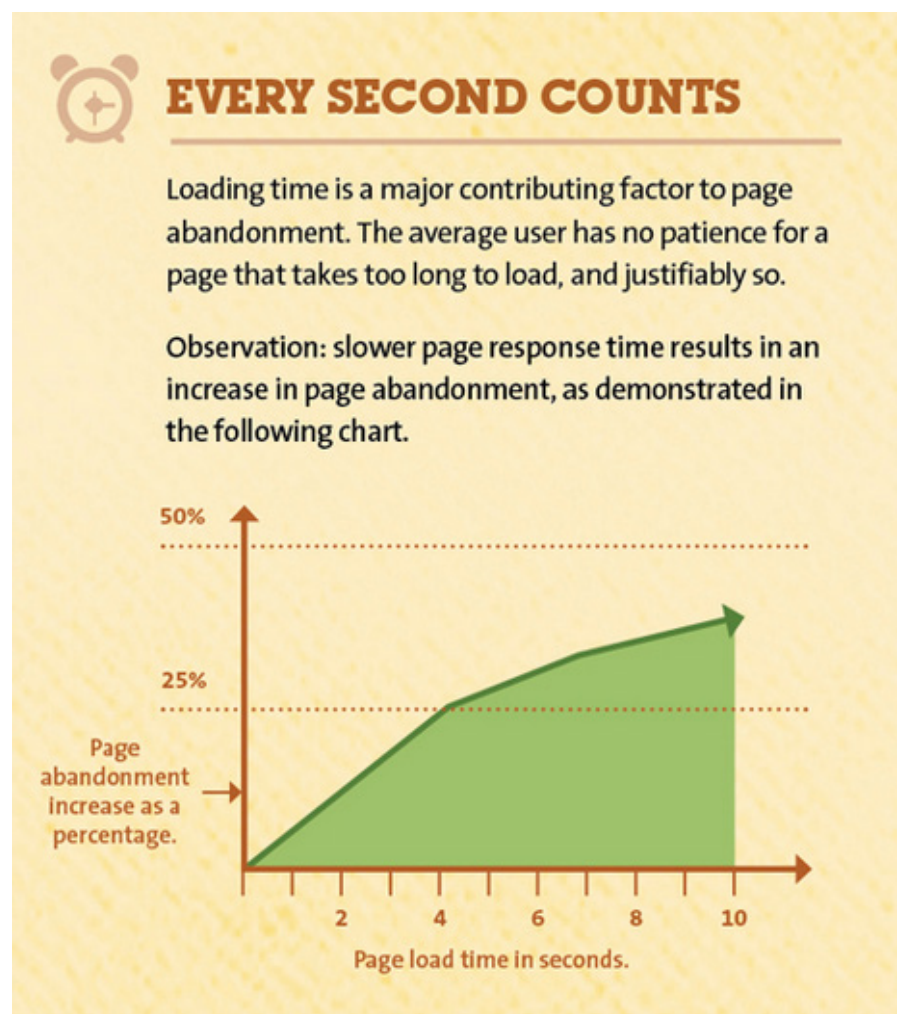
And so does Google.

‘Site Speed’, we are told by Google in the above video, **is** a ranking factor. But as with any factor Google confirms *is* a ranking signal, it’s usually a small, ‘nuanced’ one.

A fast site is a good user experience (UX), and a satisfying UX leads to higher conversions.

How fast your website loads is a critical – but often completely ignored – element in any online business – and that includes search marketing and search engine optimisation.

Very slow sites are a **bad user experience** – and Google is *all about* [GOOD UX](#) these days.



How Much is ‘Website Speed’ a Google Ranking Factor?

‘How much is a *very slow site* a *negative* ranking factor’ is a more useful interpretation of the claim that ‘*website speed is a Google ranking factor*’.

First – for I have witnessed VERY slow websites of 10 seconds and more negatively impacted in Google, and second, from statements made by Googlers:

We do say we have a small factor in there for pages that are really slow to load where we take that into account. **John Mueller, [GOOGLE](#)**

Google might crawl your site slower if you have a slow site. And that’s bad – especially if you are adding new content or making changes to it.

*We’re seeing an extremely high response-time for requests made to your site (at times, over **2 seconds to fetch a single URL**). This has resulted in us severely limiting the number of URLs we’ll crawl from your site.* **John Mueller, [GOOGLE](#)**

John specifically said 2 seconds disrupts CRAWLING activity, not RANKING ability, but you get the picture.

How Fast Should Your Website Load in 2016?

Maile Ohye, from Google, claims in the video above that:

“2 seconds is the threshold for ecommerce website acceptability. At Google, we aim for under a half second.”

That Google video is from 2010. That claim was based on independent research commissioned by a company called Akamai in 2009:

Based on the feedback of 1,048 online shoppers that were surveyed, Forrester Consulting concluded the following key findings:

- **47 percent of consumers expect a web page to load in two seconds or less**
- 40 percent of consumers will wait no more than three seconds for a web page to render before abandoning the site.
- 52 percent of online shoppers stated that quick page loading is important to their site loyalty.
- Shoppers often become distracted when made to wait for a page to load. 14 percent will begin shopping at another site, and 23 percent will stop shopping or walk away from their computer.
- Retail and travel sites that underperform lead to lost sales. 79 percent of online shoppers who experience a dissatisfying visit are less likely to buy from that site again. 64 percent would simply purchase from another online store.

Additional findings indicate that quick **page loading is a key factor in a consumer's loyalty to an eCommerce site**, especially for high spenders. 79 percent of online shoppers who experience a dissatisfying visit are less likely to buy from the same site again while 27 percent are less likely to buy from the same site's physical store, suggesting that the impact of a bad online experience will reach beyond the web and can result in lost store sales.

Akamai 2009

A decade ago, research commissioned by the same organisation claimed that web shoppers were more likely to abandon a website if it took longer than four seconds to load.

The research by Akamai in 2006 revealed users' dwindling patience with websites that take time to show up.

Akamai claimed **75% of the 1,058 people asked would not return to websites that took longer than *four* seconds to load.**

The time it took a site to appear on screen came second to *high prices* and *shipping costs* in the list of shoppers' pet-hates, the research revealed.

Akamai consulted a group who shopped regularly online to find out what they like and dislike about e-tailing sites.

About half of mature net-shoppers – who have been buying online for more than two years or who spend more than \$1,500 (£788) a year online – ranked page-loading time as a priority. Akamai claims that one-third of those questioned abandon sites that take time to load are hard to navigate or take too long to handle the checkout process.

The four-second threshold is half the time previous research, conducted during the early days of the web-shopping boom, suggested that shoppers would wait for a site to finish loading.

To make matters worse, the research found that the experience shoppers have on a retail site colours their entire view of the company behind it.

About 30% of those responding said they formed a “negative perception” of a company with a badly put-together site or would tell their family and friends about their experiences.

Further research by Akamai found that almost half of the online stores in the list of the top 500 US shopping sites take longer than the four-second threshold to finish loading.

The survey questioned 1,058 net shoppers during the first six months of 2006. Consultants Jupiter Research did the survey for Akamai.

Whether this research is 100% valid is explored by your own experience. For instance, if you KNOW that the information you need is probably on a specific web page, you’ll probably wait a lot longer than ten seconds to see the info. But if you do not...

Undeniably, though, it’s been a long-held belief in good practice website design that your website needs to load fast if you want to keep visitors happy.

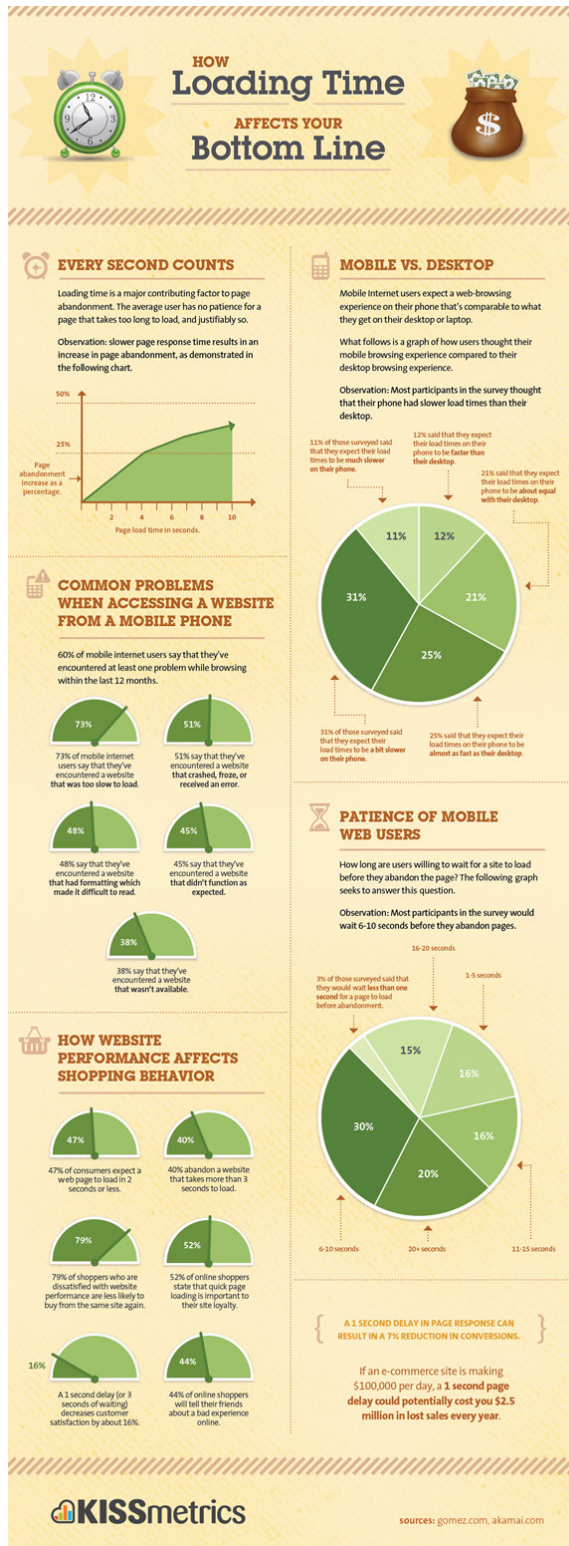
This research only backed this up.

And that was many years ago.

Today – in 2016 – Site speed is a critical area of website development and profitable e-commerce.

Desktop users expect a site to load within a second or two in 2016. Mobile users are a little more patient, for now.

See below how slow load times [impact](#) your business:



Download speeds

Bandwidth or the capacity to send and receive data is an important consideration when designing an electronic document for distribution over the Internet.

It is important that the link to the Internet (from the computer serving the pages to customers) has sufficient capacity to be able to handle the expected load.

Otherwise, the response to users will be unsatisfactorily slow.

Some people today STILL connect to the Internet over a phone line, using a modem with a speed of 28.8 to 56 kilobits per second (kbit/s).

This “narrowband” communication requires user to wait while a dial-up connection is made before they can access the Internet, and means that Internet use, when connected, is slow.

Broadband services offer significantly faster data rates, enabling the delivery of services, such as high-speed Internet access. These may also be “always on” connections to the Internet.

However, what looks great and downloads quickly within the confines of the Web manager’s high-speed network connection does not necessarily work as well for the average user of the Internet.

It is probably best to presume that your user has a SLOW connection capability – and aim to deliver for them a satisfying user experience as possible.

Then – everybody wins.

How To Speed Up Your Website Load Times

Optimise your images!!

- Remember to optimise your images – the most important thing you can do to decrease download times. Optimise just means to save for the web’ in Photoshop, for example. Keep JPGs for photographs and Gifs for images with large blocks of flat colour.
- There are several ways to optimize images and here’s one if you have Adobe Photoshop. For your JPGs, PNGs, and other files you may have that aren’t GIFs, open them in Adobe Photoshop and simply go to File > Save For Web and reduce the image to 70% (JPG) You probably won’t even notice the difference in quality, but you’ll have nearly halved the image size.

Load background images via external CSS

- It’s possible to present images as part of the background, called up through external CSS stylesheets.
- Browsers download background images after everything else. By using this technique, your text will load instantaneously, and your site users can freely roam about the page while your 50kb fancy image downloads.
- The ‘link’ is always added to the Head Section i.e. anywhere between the <head> and the </head> , add this code :<link rel=”stylesheet” type=”text/CSS” href=”your-CSS.CSS”>

Minimise white space, line returns and comment tags

- Every single letter or space in your HTML code takes up one byte. It doesn’t sound like much, but it all adds up. We’ve found that by working through your page source and eliminating unnecessary white space and comments, you can shave off up to, or even over (if your HTML is inefficient) 10% of its file size.

Remove unnecessary META tags and META content

- The most important tags for search engine optimisation are the keywords and description tags, although due to the mass abuse they’ve lost a lot of importance in recent times. When using these META tags try to keep the content for each under 200 characters – anything more increases the size of your pages. Lengthy META tags are not good for search engines anyway because they dilute your keywords.

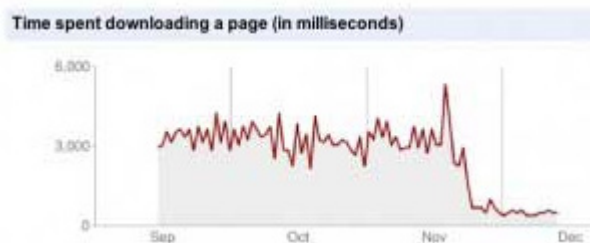
Minimise unnecessary javascript and other client side scripting

- Javascript and other clients-side “functional” elements on the page may be slowing your page down. Remove them if not entirely necessary.

UK Government recommendations:

‘Documents published on the web need to be kept small, be linked efficiently and contain only the data and graphics that they require’.

Guidelines for UK Government websites
Illustrated handbook for Web management teams



Case Study

Some time ago [Jack Osborne](#) and I decided to speed up the Hobo site to see if increasing page download speed had a positive impact on ranking, or the amount of traffic Google sent to your site.

We looked at an actual page on Hobo, and all the files involved in creating the page and looked to see where we could make speed improvements.

Essentially we took **299kb (Whoops!)** and reduced it to an ‘old-school’ **@50k target size** by:

- redeveloping our bespoke WP theme template and CSS
- compressing CSS and Javascript files
- reducing image size
- deactivating underperforming plugins
- removing some Javascript
- validating CSS and HTML
- improving the accessibility of the page
- making our form script load on only the contact page
- Gzip compression server side

Before

- Total loading time:10.5 seconds
- Total objects:78 (299.2 KB)
- External objects:4 (3.6 KB)
- (X)HTML:1 (22.5KB)
- CSS:6 (43.5KB)
- Scripts:3 (97.8KB)
- Images:68 (135.5KB)

After

- Total loading time:0.3 seconds
- Total objects:12 (50.8 KB)
- External objects:1 (1.3 KB)
- (X)HTML:1 (16.5KB)
- CSS:3 (8.2KB)
- Scripts:0
- Images:8 (26.2KB)

Google Webmaster Tools Performance Overview

Using GWT Performance Overview (found in Google Webmaster Tools LABS feature) I could monitor what Google thought of my page speeds – and as a result of the changes we made – we halved the download speed according to the measurements Google make:

On average, pages in your site take 3.4 seconds to load (updated on Dec 14, 2010). This is slower than 58% of sites. These estimates are of medium accuracy (between 100 and 1000 data points)

Clearly, there's still room for improvement on the site. But, the graph shows a big improvement, even though I started adding elements to the site since we made the changes to the site near the end of November 2010, and had since slowed things down a little again with some other plugins (that will probably be getting uninstalled):

Speed Test & Accessibility Tools Used

- <http://tools.pingdom.com/fpt/>
- <http://jigsaw.w3.org/css-validator/>
- <http://validator.w3.org/>
- <http://wave.webaim.org/>
- <http://www.cynthiasays.com/>
- <http://achecker.ca/checker/>
- <http://fae.cita.uiuc.edu/>
- <http://www.CSSdrive.com/index.php/main/CSScompressor/>

Google also has a great page with plenty of tools for the web developer serious about improving website load times. I will no doubt introduce some new things over time that will increase my download times again, but I will be sure to keep an eye on things. I'm sure there's a few other things we could do to increase the download speed of our pages, but that will do for now.

Accessibility

Why does validation matter? There are different perspectives on validation—at Google there are different approaches and priorities too—but **the Webmaster Team considers validation a baseline quality attribute**. It doesn't guarantee accessibility, performance, or maintainability, but it reduces the number of possible issues that could arise and in many cases indicates appropriate use of technology. [Google](#).

It has been long debated whether or not [valid HTML improves your actual website rankings](#). It is probably a good idea to aim for a decent level of accessibility for your website pages – its something my own site lacks at the moment with all the recent changes I have introduced.

Restructuring HTML

One of the major drawbacks with the previous WordPress template was the amount of code bloat. There were multiple divs within the code that had no effect on the visual appearance, the only thing they contributed was bumping the file size of the pages up a few kilobytes.

Coupled with the code bloat there was also a lot of non-semantic mark-up, divs with intangible classes and ids.

For the new template, we mocked up a simple wireframe, based on the existing blog layout and started to flesh out the site; what divs were needed and what the appropriate class names and ids would be. From there we starting designing the website in the browser to help iterate and see how things shaped up. A major plus point of designing in the browser is that you can see how the site displays across multiple different browsers; Apple Safari, Google Chrome, Internet Explorer and Opera.

Redoing the CSS

As well as completely recreating the template files, the CSS files were also redone. Nothing was carried over; we started with a clean slate.

The first thing we did when setting up our CSS file was to use a [reset](#) that the rest of the file would be built upon.

There is [a tutorial](#) on the *A List Apart* website that discussed how to go about creating a completely fluid/scalable website, much like you would have with an old school table but instead built entirely with divs. I had been desperate to try this in a live production site for some time, and the hobo blog provided me with this opportunity. Grab the corner of your browser window and resize the website to watch the elements flow around each other.

All of the CSS was then factored into single line declarations, as opposed to multi-line, to save valuable kilobytes.

Typography

All of the typography within the site was also addressed. We used the golden ratio, with the help of the [Modular Scale](#) website, to keep everything harmonious. Here's a tutorial on [how to use the modular scale](#) website. Moving forward – we'll probably use [Google Web Fonts](#) too.

Speed Up Contact Form 7 Plugin For WordPress

Contact Form 7 plugin for WordPress is quite bulky in terms of external scripts its loads. I have since removed this plugin and use Gravity Forms.

You can speed up how fast Contact Form 7 loads (by loads) by ensuring the associated javascript files load ONLY on the contact form itself.

Quickly optimise your contact form 7 WordPress plugin by just adding the following code to the end of your functions.php – you can take 70kb off your load time.

NOTE: Be sure to wrap the following in PHP tags in the example illustrated below:

```
add_action( 'wp_print_scripts', 'my_deregister_javascript', 100 );function  
my_deregister_javascript() {if ( !is_page('Contact') ) {wp_deregister_script( 'contact-form-7'  
);}}add_action( 'wp_print_styles', 'my_deregister_styles', 100 );function  
my_deregister_styles() {if ( !is_page('Contact') ) {wp_deregister_style( 'contact-form-7' );}}
```

Relaunching the Site

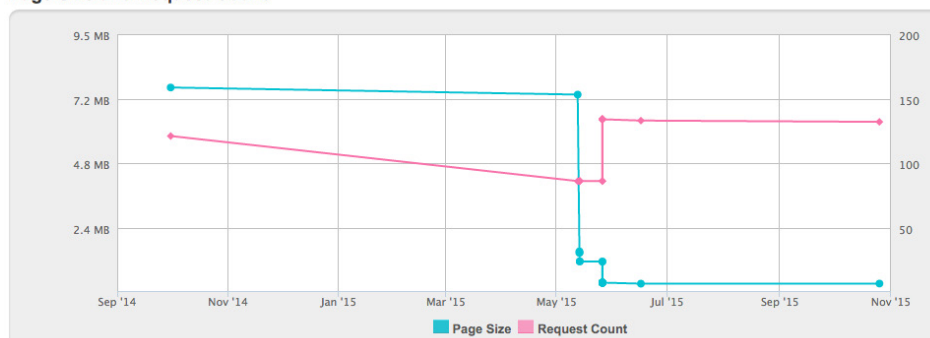
As most businesses do, we had to revamp the site after some jarring Google updates made it clear some changes needed to be made.

So I lost some of the carefully reworked code above. We had to rebuild the site on the hop, as fast as possible, and that meant some sloppiness along the way.

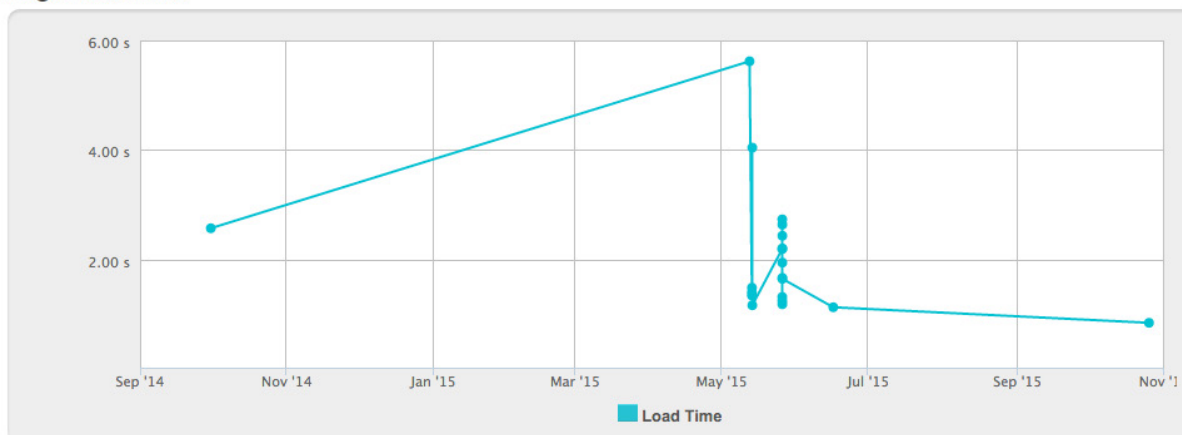
Some of the pages we had created were FAR TOO BIG, and so it was time to optimise them again!

The first place to check was Pingdom, and you can see from the images below, that we vastly improved page speed scores for important pages primarily by focusing on optimising image file size:

Page Size and Request Count



Page Load Time

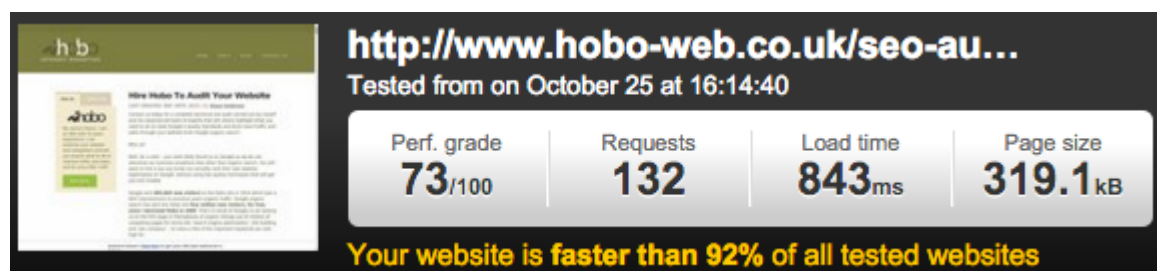


... we also took a short cut and installed [WP BJ LAZY LOAD](#) to our WordPress site to speed things up even further. This plugin plays nice with [WP SUPERCACHE](#), too, which also improves site speed greatly..

That was a risky manoeuvre because at the time we had no idea how Google would handle these 'lazy load' setups, where content loads on the user scrolling down the page.

So far it has all worked out – and the load time improvement the plugin affords has been worth it.

I'll continue to focus on improving the speed of my site when I can.



This is a great video about speeding up web pages, aimed specifically at developers – and I will be using the advice in it to improve speed on this site even further:

SO – What effect did all this variation in page load speed have on my rankings?

Did these massive differences in download speed impact the Hobo website rankings positively or negatively?

After all, Google did say site speed was a 'ranking factor'

Well, **no**, not that I measured with any accuracy in the short term.

Improving your desktop site speed score in isolation of developing a compelling user experience, will not magically lead to great rankings in Google.

As many SEO said back in the day, and Maile Ohye confirmed in the video from 2010:

Rankings is a nuanced process and there is over 200 signals, but now speed is one of them. Know that ‘content’ and relevance’ are still primary.

Is that ranking signal and slight speed improvement justification for spending hours redeveloping your site? On its own – probably not – if you have to choose between SEO clean-up tasks, website redevelopment, content marketing or making your page more relevant in the first place.

A technical approach to improving user experience, it seems to me, *would begin* with site speed.

A faster site should improve visitor satisfaction levels and the number of conversions, for instance. This very well might have a second-order effect on your rankings over time – as many SEO think that QUERY COMPLETION & SATISFACTION SIGNALS are significant measurements in how Google orders search engine results pages in 2016.

To be honest, I never expected faster website load times to directly improve the rankings of my website.

I did want a faster site, though – for all the benefits.

I still use [Google Webmaster Tools](#) and the other tools mentioned to keep an eye on website download speeds and accessibility.

Website & Page Load Speed Is A Google Ranking Factor, but....

‘content’ and relevance’ are still primary’ Maile Ohye, Google

Website and page load speed will affect Google rankings, just not as much as links, good titles & content that satisfies a search engine visitors intent. My test above confirmed what I already thought.

A fast host could be argued to be a prerequisite in 2016, and a fast site too if your web designer has any clue.

I’m asked quite a lot these days about server speed and Google rankings. It could be **part of the algorithm on some VERY minute level** (why not?), but **small differentials in page speed load** will never be as important than the actual utility or relevance of the page you want to rank.

You can’t put lipstick on a pig in 2016, and its risky, long term, to try to.

If your server is dog*&^% and your website takes minutes to load it’s a bad user experience and your site probably will not be doing your online business any good, anytime soon.

Website & Page Load Speed Tests & Tools

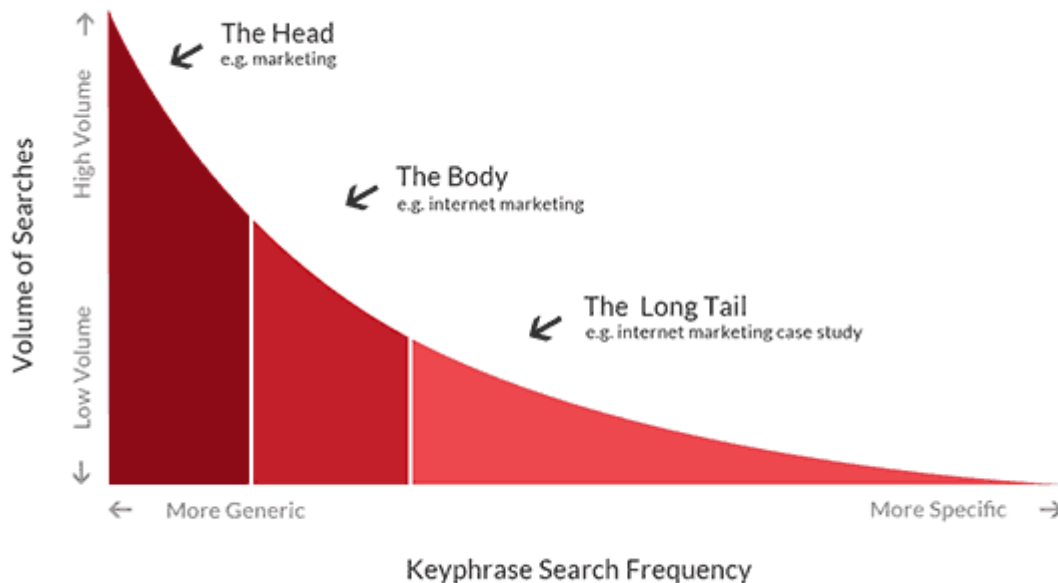
1. [Pingdom Page Load Test tool](#)
2. [Website Optimization Speed Test Tool](#)
3. [Uptrends Page Load Test Tool](#)
4. [Submit Plus Page Load Test](#)
5. [Link Vendor Page Load Test tool](#)
6. [Compare Yours & Competitors Page speed](#)
7. [Tools to speed up your site](#) (defo worth a read)

... and you always have [Page Speed](#) by Google (extension for Firefox browser)

References

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- <http://www3.akamai.com/4seconds>

How To Drive Traffic To Your Website Using Keyword Research



Is your page not ranking in Google for the right keywords? Are you spending too much money on expensive and under-performing advertising in Google Adwords? Are you looking for a cost effective way you can drive more traffic to your website?

Well, your organic website traffic levels will still be very much influenced by the actual keywords that are on your web pages – regardless if Google has somewhat moved past *simply* matching keyword searches to keywords found on pages.

Keyword research (and proper analysis of it) is perhaps *THE* single most important aspect of any online marketing campaign (SEO or PPC) – and a pillar of successful search marketing.

Done professionally – keyword research is *STILL* the simplest way to drive more traffic to your website.

Identifying the most valuable and most popular relevant keywords from the beginning of any internet marketing campaign is the first step to ranking success across many marketing channels (including search engine optimisation (SEO) and Google Adwords marketing).

In short:

1. In competitive niches, the quantity and quality of *independent* backlinks pointing to your website *from* other websites are largely responsible for WHERE your page ranks in Google.
2. The occurrence, frequency and prominence of keywords and key phrases in text on any page is VERY LARGELY responsible for WHAT you rank for in Google.
3. The occurrence, frequency and prominence of similar keywords on OTHER pages of your site, relative to the page you *want* to rank, can also have a positive or negative impact when it comes to ranking your target page.

Keyword research for SEO is about finding the best keywords to put, essentially, in your Page Title Element and Primary Page Content text.

It is about optimising the CORRECT page on your site to make it as RELEVANT as possible so it can rank for as MANY RELATED long tail queries as possible that meet a visitor's INTENT.

An Introduction To Keyword Research For Beginners

US-based **Aaron Wall** is quite probably my favourite **SEO blogger** and has been since long before I started blogging myself (back in 2007).

Back in October 2009 I pinged Aaron and asked him if he would take me through the **basics of keyword research** for those visitors to my blog who are just starting out, and he helped me create a quick beginner's guide to keyword research, as it was one area not covered to any great extent in my [SEO blog](#).

I've been tidying up my blog [post-Google Panda](#) in 2016 but I kept Aaron's advice as it is an excellent start for beginners and still as relevant today as it was then.

The first step in any SEO campaign is to find out WHICH keywords you can profit from ranking for....

EDIT – Please note all links in this post are placed by myself. Shaun

What Is Keyword Research? Definition:

In the offline world companies spend millions of dollars doing market research to try to understand market demand and market opportunities.

Well with **search consumers are telling marketers exactly what they are looking for – through the use of keywords.**

And there are tons of free and [paid SEO tools](#) out there to help you understand your market. In addition to those types of tools lots of other data points can be included as part of your strategy, including:

1. data from your web analytics tools (if you already have a website)
2. running test AdWords campaigns (to buy data and exposure directly from Google...and they have a broad match option where if you bid on auto insurance it will match queries like cheap detroit auto insurance)
3. competitive research tools (to get a basic idea of what is working for the established competition)
4. customer interactions and feedback
5. mining and monitoring forums and question and answer type websites (to find common issues and areas of opportunity)

Just how important is it in the mix for a successful SEO campaign?

Keywords are huge.

Without doing keyword research most projects don't create much traction (unless they happen to be something surprisingly original and/or viral and/or of amazing value).

If you are one of those remarkable businesses that to some degree creates a new category (say an iPhone) then SEO is not critical to success.

But those types of businesses are rare.

The truth is most businesses are pretty much average, or a little bit away from it, with a couple unique specialties and/or marketing hooks.

SEO helps you discover and cater to existing market demand and helps you attach your business to growing trends through linguistics.

You can think of SEO implications for everything from what you name your business, which domain names you buy, how you name your content, which page titles you use, and the on page variation you work into page content.

Keyword research is not a destination, but an iterative process.

For large authority sites that are well trusted you do not have to be perfect to compete and build a business, but **if your site is thin or new in a saturated field then keyword research is absolutely crucial.**

And even if your website is well trusted then using effective keyword strategy helps create what essentially amounts to free profits and expanded business margins because the cost of additional relevant search exposure is cheap, but the returns can be great because the traffic is so targeted.

And since a [number one ranking in Google](#) gets many multiples of traffic that a #3 or #4 ranking would get, the additional returns of improving rankings typically far exceed the cost of doing so (at least for now, but as more people figure this out the margins will shrink to more normal levels.)

Where do you start?

What kind of ambitions do you have? Are they matched by an equivalent budget?

How can you differentiate yourself from competing businesses?

Are there any other assets (market data, domain names, business contacts, etc.) you can leverage to help build your new project?

Does it make sense to start out overtly commercial, or is there an informational approach that can help you gain traction quicker?

I recently saw a new credit card site launching off of the idea of an industry hate site “credit cards will ruin your life”.

After they build link equity they can add the same stuff that all the other thin affiliate websites have, but remain different AND well linked to.

Once you get the basic business and marketing strategy down then you can start to feel out the market for ideas as to how broad or narrow to make your website and start mapping out some of your keyword strategy against URLs.

And if you are uncertain about an idea I am a big fan of launching a blog and participating in the market and seeing what you can do to find holes in the market, build social capital, build links, and build an audience – in short, build leverage...once you have link equity you can spend it any way you like (well almost).

And (especially if you are in a small market with limited search data) before you spend lots of money on building your full site and link building it makes sense to run a test campaign on AdWords and build from that data.

Doing so can save you a lot of money in the long run, and that is one of the reasons my wife was so eager to start a [blog about PPC](#).

Her first few campaigns really informed the SEO strategy and she fell in love with the near instantaneous feedback that AdWords offers.

What does the research involve?

Keyword research can be done in many different stages of the SEO process – everything from domain name selection, to planning out an initial site map, to working it into the day to day content creation process for editorial staff of periodical content producers.

And you can use your conversion, ranking, and traffic data to help you discover

- new topics to write about
- ways to better optimize your existing site and strategy
- anchor text to target when link building

Keyword research helps define everything from what site hosts the content, to the [page title](#), right on through to [what anchor text to use](#) when cross linking into hot news.

Google has the best overall keyword data because of their huge search market share. Due to that selective and random filtering of Google's data, it also makes it important to use other keyword research tools to help fill in the gaps.

In addition, many search engines recommend search queries to searchers via [search suggest](#) options that drop down from the search box.

Such search suggest tools are typically driven by search query volume with popular keyword variations rising to the top.

How much research do you do on a project?

It depends on how serious of a commitment the project is. Sometimes we put up test sites that are start off far from perfect and then iteratively improve and reinvest in the ones that perform the best.

If we know a site is going to be core to our overall strategy I wouldn't be against using 10 different keyword tools to create a monster list of terms, and then run that list through the Google AdWords API to get a bit more data about each. (*EDIT – Shaun – That's how I do it, too.*)

On one site I know we ended up making a list of 100,000+ keywords, sorted by value, then started checking off the relevant keywords.

Do the keywords change as the project progresses?

Yes and no.

Meaning as your site gains more link authority you will be able to rank better for broader keywords that you might not have ranked for right off the start.

BUT that does not mean that you should have avoided targeting those keywords off the start.

Instead I look for ways to target easier keywords that also help me target harder higher traffic keywords. For example, if I aim to rank a page for “best credit cards” then that page should also be able to rank well (eventually) for broader keywords like “credit cards.”

You can think of your keyword traffic profile as a bit of a curve (by how competitive the query is and the number of keywords in the search query).

This type of [traffic distribution curve](#) starts off for new sites far to the right (low competition keywords with few matches in the search index that are thus easy to rank for based on on-page optimization, often with many words in each search query) and then as a site builds link authority and domain authority that curve moves left, because you are able to compete for some of the more competitive keywords ... which often have their results determined more based on links-based metrics.

Can you give me an example how you would research and analyse a specific niche – the steps you’d normally take?

Everything is custom based on if a site exists or is brand new.

And if it exists how much authority does the site have? How much revenue does it have?

There is not really a set normal.

Sometimes while doing keyword research I come to the conclusion that the costs of ranking are beyond the potential risk-adjusted returns.

Other times there is a hole in the market that is somewhat small or large. Depending on assets and resources (and how the project compares to our other sites) we might have vastly different approaches.

How would you deploy your research in 3 areas – on page, on site, and in links

As far as on page optimization goes, in the past it was all about repetition. That changed around the end of 2003, with the Google Florida update.

Now it is more about making sure the page has the keyword in the title and maybe sprinkled a bit about the page content, but also that there is adequate usage of keyword modifiers, variation in word order, and variation in plurality. Rather than worrying about the [perfect keyword density](#) try to write a fairly natural sounding page (as though you knew nothing about SEO), and then maybe go back to some keyword research tools and look at some competing pages for keyword modifiers and alternate word forms that you can try to naturally work into the copy of the page and headings on the page.

As far as links go, it is smart to use some variation in those as well. Though the exact amount need depends in part on [site authority](#) (large authoritative sites can generally be far more aggressive than smaller lesser trusted websites can).

The risk of being too aggressive is that you can get your page filtered out (if, say, you have thousands of links and they all use the exact same link anchor text). (see [Google Penguin Update](#))

There is not a yes/no exact science that says do xyz across the board, but generally if you want to improve the ranking of a specific page then pointing targeted link anchor text at that page is generally one of the best ways to do so. (EDIT – Shaun – More risky in 2016 because of ‘[unnatural link](#)’ penalties).

But there is also a rising tides lift all boats effect to where if you get lots of links into any section of your website that will also help other parts of your site rank better – so sometimes it makes sense to create content around linking opportunities rather than just trying to build links into an unremarkable commercial web page.

Is there anything people should avoid when compiling their data?

I already sort of brushed off keyword density.

In addition, many people worry about KEI or other such measures of competition, but as stated above, **even if a keyword is competitive it is often still worth creating a page about it which happens to target it AND keywords that contain it + other modifiers** (i.e. best credit cards for credit cards).

Don't look for any keyword tool to be perfect or exact. Be willing to accept rough ranges and relative volumes rather than expecting anything to be exactly perfect.

A huge portion of [search queries \(over 25%\) are quite rare and have few searches](#).

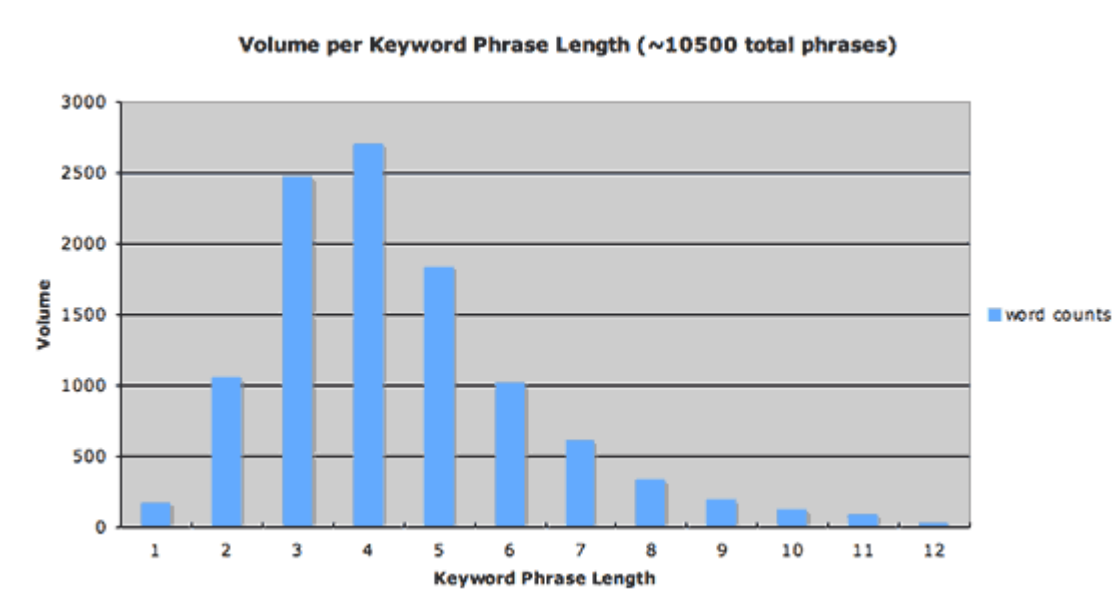
Many such words do not appear on public keyword tools (in part due to limited sampling size for 3rd party tools and in part because search engines want advertisers to get into bidding wars on the top keywords rather than buying cheap clicks that nobody else is bidding on).

So there you have it. Keyword research for beginners from somebody who knows what he's on about.

Make sure you visit Aaron at [SEO Book](#) – it's (still) one of my regular destinations and [subscribing to his feed](#) should be a pre-requisite if you do SEO in any shape or form.

The Long Tail

Here's some interesting analysis from one of Aaron's links above:



Looking at other long tail studies, I already know broad keyword terms appear to receive the most traffic.

However, the really important point to note here is that we've got **~70% of total keyword traffic going to phrases 4 terms or greater**, with the remainder going to one to three term phrases.

So really, it's more accurate to say that the first one or two head term lengths a website receives doesn't really have the most volume, as the traditional long tail chart depicts – *it's actually around 3-5 words per keyword phrase that make up the sweet spot in terms of highest volume per website.*

Of course results may vary depending on the type of website and size, but I'm betting on average you'd get close to the results I came up with.

Keyword Research Is VITAL

How Vital?

Well, site authority aside, a large part of optimising ANY page simply involves putting keywords on it. Specific keywords. In specific places. In specific order.

Even on a granular level – **NOT having one exact LETTER on the page can mean you are 100% irrelevant for Google** – and it's always been that way.

It is how Google filters and orders results.

Here's an observation that more accurately describes this;

Hobo is a SEO Company in Scotland. We're on-site SEO largely. We try and make sites better. We operate in Greenock. We don't promise the earth. Passionate about SEO.

That text above is 30 words. Cut and paste the above into Google ([or just go here](#)). You'll see; we have a 100% relevance with this search as all the words are on the page.

Now do the same search but add a letter to the search, or a word that is not on this page (or in links pointing to this page like this). [Here I added one letter](#).

...Google **fails to return this page**, even though it has thirty of the keywords, all lined up next to each other (surely) a possible relevant match that Google clearly fails to return.

Here's another observation:

NEAR RELEVANCY and EXACT MATCH RELEVANCY

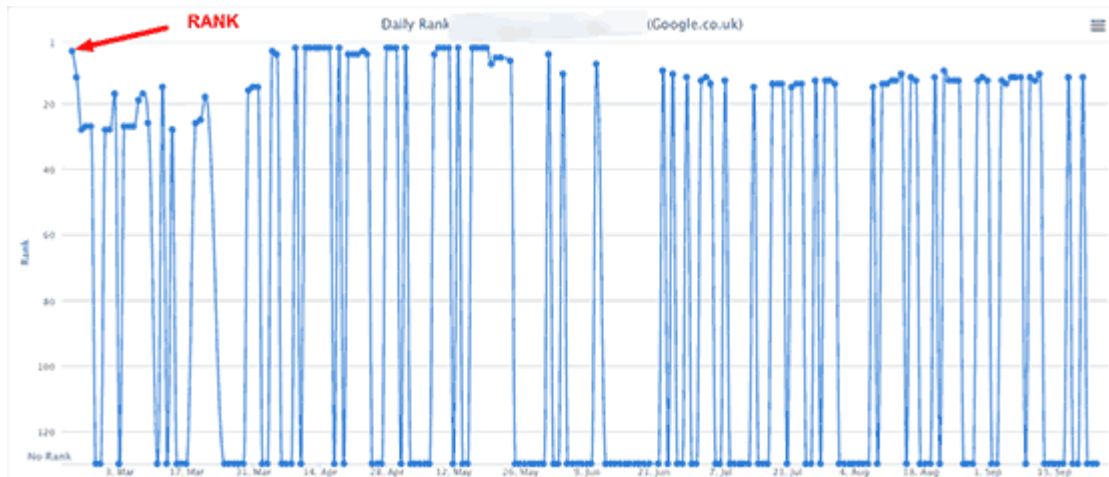
This is an observation about traffic declines and ranking fluctuations in Google SERPs. This is an opportunity that can be detected on your site with some rank data to hand.

Traffic can decline and rankings can fluctuate for a multitude of reasons, but here's one reason that I haven't seen anyone talk about.

It is no secret that Google creates Everflux its SERPs in various ways from the obvious (from high topical relevance and, for instance, multiple indexes served by multiple data centres) to the less obvious (location and site quality).

Google also rotates through data centres where your site does not feature AT ALL because you do not have one word on the page. That is – **'data centre 1' has you at no2 – and 'data centre 2' has you not in top 100.**

Look at this image:



ABOVE is a snapshot of the performance of a 4-word keyword phrase, one of a selection of ‘secondary’ terms I was interested in.

I track these type of keywords to understand a little about what’s going on at Google on a granular level (note – I don’t test for these, I find them).

If you understand what is happening, you’ll see in the IMAGE ABOVE that – one day I rank for the term – and the next day it does not.

It goes on like that for some months..... sometimes on... sometimes off.

How can you be number 2 in Google in one particular rankings report and nowhere in the next?

Crap rank checker aside, of course, it’s because Google regularly makes small modifications about how it publishes its search engine results pages (at a very granular level) – and in this instance – in one set of results I rank (as high as) no2 and in other samplings I took the next day, another VERY SIMILAR index is served where my page does not rank at all.

But – how can that be?

How can you be RELEVANT and NOT RELEVANT if you’ve made a quality page with a few thousand words on a very clean domain? Especially when the actual phrase Google won’t rank you for is EXACTLY what the page is about?

The answer seems to lie in NEAR RELEVANCY and EXACT MATCH RELEVANCY results that Google serves us in certain SERPs – another way Google shakes up its results.

A NEAR MATCH RESULT for a keyword phrase is when the ACTUAL EXACT MATCH KEYWORD PHRASE used in the search query is NOT present on the page but Google has worked out (looking at the UNIQUE keywords used on the page) that the page in question is VERY PROBABLY a 100% match for this query.

SO – the page could be 100% relevant – but because it does not have the EXACT QUERY used by the searcher in the same WORD ORDERING, it becomes 100% NOT RELEVANT on one, or many of Google’s set of results.

That’s pretty harsh! But... if Google didn’t do this – sites with incredible domain authority would rank for even more.

In the past – Google would send publishers a lot of NEAR MATCH longtail traffic – but now that traffic has been squeezed and is constantly squeezed every day – and it looks as though this is one way Google achieves this.

One could say Google is CONSTANTLY eating away at traffic levels that at one time in the past it would have sent you – but also – it’s sharing that traffic out amongst other sites – so it’s nothing personal – and Google has a lot of competing pages these days to choose from.

We all need to remember that Google has users to satisfy – and delivering pages with the exact match term on them (regardless of your domain authority and very relevant page) could be seen as the safe bet.

Of course – you are never supposed to know about this because Google makes it impossible to find this sort of information in Analytics with most keywords ‘not provided’.

The ONLY way you can check this is by physically checking where you rank – and regularly.

Most people only track the main keywords they want to rank for – rather than the longer tail variations of those keyword phrases – which can be where the most likely transactional customer is hiding.

It's an easy fix on a granular level.

Just add the actual keyword phrase to that page, AT LEAST, ONCE and you stabilise rankings across these indexes and double the traffic to that page alone.

It's NEVER been more important or MORE REWARDING (in relative terms!) to do PROPER EXTENSIVE keyword research and know exactly what you want to rank for (and close NEAR MATCHES you SHOULD RANK FOR) and fill these relevancy gaps in Google results.

Of course – I have tested the fix for this on many occasions I've seen this NEAR RELEVANCY issue impact rankings I can influence.....



Just adding 'original content' is not enough and it won't ever be. As long as a search engine displays organic results based on KEYWORDS and LINKS and the search engine is intent on manipulating it's results on a very granular level like this (and MANY other ways) – a search engine optimiser can always get more traffic out of any page.

Does it work this way all the time? Unknown.

What makes a page encounter 'NEAR RELEVANCY' problems?

Well,

1. GOOGLE, depending on how it wants to sort results by RELEVANCY or AUTHORITY.
2. YOU, depending on what keywords you have placed in the text copy on that page and (perhaps) how your competing pages on your own site cannibalise your own traffic. I *think* the example above illustrates a site losing a little domain authority that took it below a threshold that if I wanted to stabilise rankings, I needed to have the

EXACT term now featuring on the page in question. It may be for a totally unrelated issue – but as with many things in SEO, I’m comfortable just having the fix, for now, as most understanding about how Google works is abstract at best (on a very granular level) .

When I first encountered this years ago, I was surprised to the extent by which a page can be RELEVANT and NOT RELEVANT over such a granular issue, flipping between data centres, day to day or minute to minute.

Finding these near relevancy gaps is a best practice for me, as it is the surest way to drive more relevant traffic to the site and is all 100% white hat with no risk (unless of course you are keyword stuffing the sh!t out of a low-quality page to begin with).

It’s why I’ve built a tool to accurately identify this kind of opportunity and manage deployment of fixes.

I can tell you now – the impact of this treatment over a 25-page site is not that immediately apparent – but identified over many pages on a much bigger site – it’s a guaranteed way of pushing your relevant traffic north by some way.

Believe it or not – you get the best out of this strategy by following Google’s guidelines to the letter, so we all don’t need to go blackhat just yet (unless of course it’s a point of principle to take that route in the first place).

How you respond to this kind of activity by Google is to do PROPER IN-DEPTH keyword research and ensure if you think you should rank for ANY term – it really is getting that granular.

Don’t rely on your domain authority or near relevancy (even if it is 100%!) to be enough – and certainly don’t just pump out unfocused text content for content sake.

Adding One Word To Your Page Can Make All The Difference



The chart above (from last year) illustrates a valuable 4-word term I noticed a relevant page did not rank for – but I thought it should..

This is on page SEO or ‘rank modification’, that’s white hat, 100% Google friendly and never, ever going to cause you a problem with Google.

This ‘trick’ works with any keyword phrase, on any site, with obvious differing results based on availability of competing pages in SERPs, and availability of content on your site.

The keyword phrase I am testing rankings for isn’t ON the page, and I did NOT add the key phrase.... or in incoming links, or using any technical tricks like redirects or any hidden technique, but as you can see from the chart, rankings seem to be going in the right direction.

You can profit from it if you know a little about how Google works (or seems to work, in many observations, over years, excluding when Google throws you a bone on synonyms).

You can’t ever be 100% certain you know how Google works on any level, unless it’s data showing you’re wrong, of course.)

What did I do to rank number 1 from nowhere for that key phrase?

I added one keyword to the page in plain text because adding the actual ‘keyword phrase’ itself would have made my text read a bit keyword stuffed for other variations

of the main term. It gets interesting if you do that to a lot of pages, and a lot of keyword phrases. The important thing is keyword research – and knowing which unique keywords to add.

This illustrates a key to ‘relevance’ is.... a keyword. The right keyword.

Yes – plenty of other things can be happening at the same time. It’s hard to identify EXACTLY why Google ranks pages all the time...but you can COUNT on other things happening and just get on with what you can see works for you.

In a time of **light optimisation**, it’s useful to earn a few terms you SHOULD rank for in simple ways that leave others wondering how you got it.

Of course, you can still keyword stuff a page, or still spam your link profile – but it is ‘light’ optimisation I am genuinely interested in testing on this site – how to get more with less – I think that’s the key to not tripping Google’s aggressive algorithms.

There are many tools on the web to help with basic keyword research (including the Google Keyword Planner [tool](#) and there are **even more useful third party [SEO tools](#)** to help you do this).

You can use these keyword research tools to identify opportunities to get more traffic to a page.

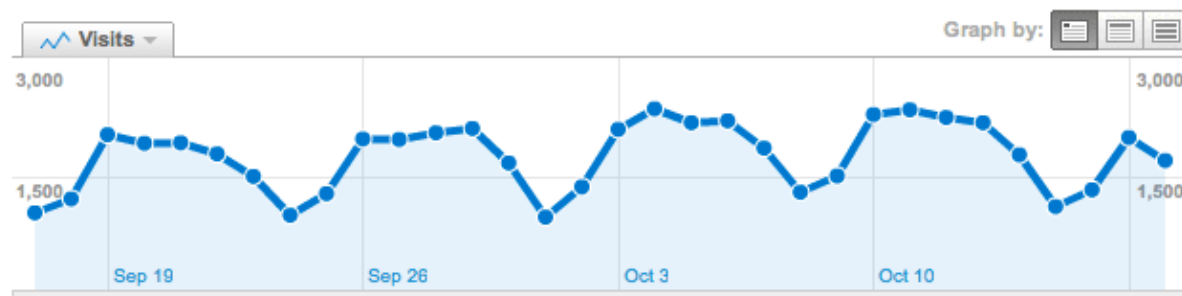
Google Analytics Keyword ‘Not Provided.’

Overview » Search Engines »

Search Engine:

google

Sep 17, 2011 - Oct 18, 2011



google sent 57,359 non-paid visits via 31,223 keywords

Show: non-paid | total | paid

BUT WE ARE NOT TELLING YOU WHICH ONES!



Site Usage

Goal Set 1

AdSense Revenue

Views:

Google Analytics was the very best place to look at keyword opportunity for some (especially older) sites, but that all changed a few years back.

Google **stopped telling us which keywords are sending traffic to our sites from the search engine back in October 2011**, as part of privacy concerns for it's users.

Google will now begin encrypting searches that people do by default, if they are logged into Google.com already through a secure connection. The change to SSL search also means that sites people visit after clicking on results at Google will no longer receive “referrer” data that reveals what those people searched for, except in the case of ads.

Google Analytics now instead displays – keyword “**not provided**“, instead.

In Google's new system, referrer data will be blocked. This means site owners will begin to lose valuable data that they depend on, to understand how their sites are found through Google. They'll still be able to tell that someone came from a Google search. They won't, however, know what that search was. [SearchEngineLand](#)

You can still get *some* of this data if you sign up for **Google Webmaster Tools** (and you can combine this in Google Analytics) but the data even there is limited and often not entirely the most accurate. The keyword data can be useful, though – and access to backlink data is essential these days.

This is another example of Google making ranking in organic listings HARDER – a change for ‘users’ that seems to have the most impact on ‘marketers’ outside of Google’s ecosystem – yes – search engine optimisers.

Now, consultants need to be page-centric (abstract, I know), instead of just keyword centric when optimising a web page for Google. There are now plenty of third party tools that help when researching keywords but most of us miss the kind of keyword intelligence we used to have access to.

Proper keyword research is important because getting a site to the top of Google eventually comes down to your text content on a page and keywords in external & internal links. Altogether, Google uses these signals to determine where you rank if you rank at all.

Example: How Effective Research Works To Drive More Traffic To A Site

Scenario – I had a post a few years old on a blog that got a decent amount of search traffic every month.

It received @200 on-topic, relevant visits every month for a year.

It would be nice if this page (if still relevant advice) got 500 visitors a month I thought. That’s what I thought so I had a look at the post and had a think about how I get more out of the post without a manipulative link building campaign to increase ranking for a particular keyword.

There were 8521 words on the page (including comments) – the actual article was 5683 words long – perfect for the long tail of search and ideal article to test this out on.

Comments were closed the entire duration of the graph below:



Search sent 7,427 non-paid visits via 1,486 keywords + landing pages

Filtered for keywords containing **CONFIDENTIAL** and landing pages containing **"CONFIDENTIAL"**

Show: [total](#) | [paid](#) | [non-paid](#)

Here's the simple steps I took to get a post that averaged @200 visitors to a post that last month got @700 visitors from organic (natural) search (mostly from Google).

It was a blog post, so the title was short and snappy, with the keyword once.

Title length was under 70 characters so it could be read easily in Google.

It had picked up some useful, relevant links, and was on a mildly trusted domain, and continues to pick up natural links from forums, etc.

This is the perfect type of post to do this with.

- 1. I have the content, but what keywords are used by folk to search for that content.** The *Google Keyword Tool* might not be 100% accurate, but I used it to identify quickly what Google says is the most popular searches relevant to my post. I use SEMRUSH usually for more in-depth analysis.
- 2. What keyword traffic am I already getting to that page?** I looked at the traffic the page was already getting, using *Google Analytics*, and identified the keyword phrases searchers were using to find this post. (Not that you can do this at all in 2016 with any exact accuracy)
- 3. Looking for keyword phrases that drove traffic that I might rank for.** I took all these keywords and put them in a rank checker, and over some time identified the top 50-100 referring keyword phrases from both the above sources THAT THE PAGE WASN'T ALREADY NO1 for. At the same time, I could see terms I was no1 for that got very little traffic.

4. **Important Keyword Phrases In The Page Title.** I optimised the front of my title tag for the two top performing keyword phrases
5. **Long Page Titles.** I used a LONG TITLE ELEMENT and basically didn't write 'best practice' for search engines, I wrote a massive title with all the best performing keywords I could find in Google Analytics (THAT I WASN'T ALREADY NUMBER 1 FOR). I did make the beginning of the title readable, but heavily weighted towards what the actual keyword phrase Google said was popular. Title length ended up being over 150 characters – but relevant, and plain English, so not too spammy either IMO. While this still works, I would be careful spamming Page Titles in 2016 – but long titles, where relevant, are still OK.
6. **Content Tweaking.** I modified the content, making it more 'relevant', and introducing the odd word here and there that my analysis hinted at there might be more traffic if I was higher up (like to ensure the exact phrases I am targeting on the page is on the page, for instance)
7. **Internal Links.** I made sure in my internal navigation I linked to the page with the best performing key phrase opportunities from my analysis to introduce them into my link profile (once – just to get them in there – old habit).

If you are new to SEO, you'd be better reading my [SEO tips](#) page or my [off page SEO](#) advice.

If you need professional keyword research services – it is part of any [SEO audit](#) I am hired to do.

Learn Keyword Research Skills

Here's some good articles for beginners to learn more about this important aspect of marketing online:

- <http://www.viperchill.com/keyword-research/>
- <http://www.wordstream.com/articles/ultimate-guide-to-keyword-competition>

Professional Keyword Research Services

You can employ my experienced professional keyword researchers in the UK to find the valuable keywords your website should be and could be ranking high in Google free and paid listings.

It's a crucial part of any [site audit](#) my team completes.

We've developed the latest keyword intelligence software and advanced tools to help us quickly develop smart keyword marketing plans and strategies suitable for big brands' campaigns and small businesses alike to help outfox your competition.

We have experience in delivering the very the best keyword research services to clients in thousands of competitive business niches.

Our methods and techniques for optimising pages are deployed to Google Webmaster Guidelines standards.

Contact us to buy ad-hoc competitive keyword analysis reports on any niche, or we can also submit a proposal for your SEO and pay-per-click daily, weekly or monthly management requirements.

Link Building: How To Build Links To Your Website in 2016

What is link building in SEO?

A simple definition of *link building* in 2016 is that it is the process of getting other websites to link to your site to improve your rankings in search engines like Google.

There are many ways to build links in 2016. Some techniques are ‘legitimate’, ‘white hat’ and ‘natural’, and many – perhaps most – are classified as ‘black hat’. Such techniques violate Google’s Webmaster Guidelines and are labelled ‘*web spam*’.

This link building guide is for beginners – it’s not a guide on how to spam Google.

Link building (a big part of ‘off page SEO’) can be a *dirty phrase to use* in 2016 and for some, is a tactic to avoid. Some would claim that is because Google has, very successfully, equated linkbuilding with web spam, and the industry news machine is started almost entirely – all the time – and fuelled by Google PR *saying* something.

Not all link building is web spam and in fact, building links in 2016 is still an incredibly important aspect of search engine optimisation. It is just not the only thing to [focus on](#).

Natural Links V Unnatural Links

- Google is on record saying it does not want to count any link that is not editorial – or freely given.
- Google wants to reward high-quality ‘user value add’ content that has earned *organic* or *natural* links. They want to reward a ‘good user experience’, basically – and *unnatural links* don’t form any part of that concept.
- Google never has wanted to count manufactured links – but its algorithms don’t work as well as they would like or at least, they say they do. So, some marketers shortcut the ‘value add’ task of the job and just build *unnatural links* to a site. This affects how a links-based search engine – like Google – *rates* the ‘popularity’ – and so ranking ability – of a particular website.
- The more links Google hasn’t classed as spam – the higher you rank – and the more traffic you get. Sort of.
- The type of links Google wants to count does not scale easily, and in fact, the type of links that scale easily are exactly the type of links Google wants to (at best) ignore or retroactively punish the violation. Perhaps that is the whole point.
- Critics will say this is because SEO is the biggest ‘threat’ to Adwords, Google’s sponsored advertising channel – but if Google didn’t take action on industrial scale manipulation – it would make the existence of their guidelines redundant.
- If a link is manipulative – it is spam – according to the Googleplex.
- You don’t need machine automation to be classed as a spammer. Somebody sitting at a desk making these low-quality links all day – manually – to fool only Google – that’s spam too – manual or not.
- Posting lots of low-quality guest posts or low-quality press releases on sites with a history of spamming Google – that’s spam too. It all comes down to the end product – the type of link you generate as a result of your activity.
- If links are designed ‘JUST’ to manipulate Google – [Google calls them unnatural links](#) – and if you have too many of them – you get a ‘penalty’ – or at least swept up in the carnage of the next negative algorithm update designed specifically to de-rank sites with those kind of links. Ranking adjustments, I think, could be based on how long you got away with fooling Google – and what Google thinks that deserves.
- The website link building industry was largely based on that kind of unnatural link building activity. Many still do practice those techniques now, clearly, ignoring the guidelines. I *know* the first links I ever ‘built’ would today be labelled ‘unnatural’ today – and so would my first optimisation techniques – but it’s a recognisable trend in Google **what’s grey hat SEO today is black hat seo tomorrow.**

- Take note that if it works to manipulate Google *without* you jumping through the *value add* hoop in the middle of that strategy, which Google *demand*s you jump through – it's spam. In short, it is evident if it is a scalable approach to manipulating Google – it's spam.
- The professional services industry, which is led heavily by the Google PR machine, has little chance of deviating from [Google's Webmaster Guidelines](#), for fear of, some say, Google's heavy handed approach.

Is Link Building Dead?

NO, but unnatural links can't be the day job for any professional SEO, who has the responsibility for a real business's website traffic.

Some can say 'link building is dead' but the fact is – in 2016 – building links (any kinds of links) STILL affects your rankings in Google, in a BIG way, either positively – if from a trusted source – OR – negatively – if flagged as suspicious, over time.

Quality content drives the organic link building end-results Google claims it wants to reward with visibility in its SERPs.

Getting and keeping a variety of different 'INDEPENDENT' high-quality links to your website is still THE most important factor in getting unpaid traffic from Google in competitive niches not riddled with spam.

For the most part, Google will ignore a lot of your links, and will reward any site with what practitioners call, rightly or wrongly, [domain authority](#), over time, based on the 'quality' of the links you have managed to have pointed at your site.

It's been the case historically that more domain authority you have, the less unique offering you need when it comes to 'content' – although recent Google Quality Updates seem to focus heavily on CONTENT QUALITY, too!

Recent History

Just before April 2012, after years of Google doing little to combat this type of off-page SEO at scale, even an inexperienced link builder could make just about anything rank in Google, for anything, without much consequence. Simply by creating a 300-word article and building 500 unnatural links to it from (even very low-quality blogs) with unique anchor text, spread out over a few months, you could achieve top rankings. Link builders could do this largely free from fear that Google would do much about it – because everybody seemed to be ‘doing it’ (in competitive niches).

It was relatively easy, compared to today!

Industrial scale link building services were dictating the very SERPs owned by Google, *just* by taking advantage of the way Google works in counting links as votes and ‘ranking factors’.

So, just as many were about to turn the dial on article spinning to blogs up to 11 and go on holiday, Google nuked this and a lot of other low-quality links with the **Google Penguin** update and an old mantra shouted even louder – earn rankings based on *merit and uniqueness, or be punished*.

When I say, ‘nuked’ – of course, this practice still goes on.

It can still be effective, but this activity comes with an increased risk of Google penalty, even when you are an experienced black-hat. This practice is still offered, today, as linkbuilding services and packages to unsuspecting business owners – when it is not a suitable route for real companies to take with a single website.

Maybe it shouldn’t be THAT important going forward, to have only one website, but that’s beyond the scope of this article.

Google has a few surprises for webmasters bending the rules using what they call *spammy* links. As well as investing more manpower to hand out MANUAL ACTIONS (penalties), Google introduced a myriad of algorithm changes including the [Google Panda Update](#); we think, to deal with those [low-quality pages](#), and GOOGLE PENGUIN; we think, to deal with those low-quality (see unnatural) links.

Google PANDA and PENGUIN are algorithm changes (as opposed to *penalties*) – but critics will say that is splitting hairs.

FYI I’ve very much simplified these two algorithm changes in Google, but trip a PANDA/SITE QUALITY or PENGUIN filter, and traffic levels can take a nosedive overnight – and they might never come back.

A kick in the balls is a kick in the balls – you’ll think you’re penalised, and it will feel like one, looking at your traffic from Google.

My blog is not a black hat SEO blog. I won’t go into link wheels, link hubs, blog networks, three-way links, tiered link building service, illegal hacks or redirects (other than mention them) because I don’t do any of that anymore (not that I did much of that).

For me (at least) the focus since Google Penguin in April 2012 (and especially since the introduction of the disavow links device) has focused entirely on building something useful on my site that will attract links so I don’t need to build unnatural links and be fearfully looking over my shoulder at every [major algorithm change](#).

Negative SEO Killed Unnatural Links

My notes in this article are for money sites – sites you DO NOT want to burn in Google – sites you want to build something useful to people (that makes money). If you know your only option is to break the rules and have a short-term focus, hire a link buyer or linkbuilding specialist who can help you with your business model, too, because you'll need it – and that's not me.

I work with companies who are thinking of the long-term health of their business and who understands that the key to ranking in Google in the future is by making the website better, richer in content and the best user experience it can be.

It's much easier to get links to something that's useful, and when you earn rankings, it's a more stable existence in Google these days. Too many people submit spam reports and too many people engage in negative SEO for me to invest too much in unnatural links these days.

I've counted at least SEVEN Negative SEO attacks against this site in the last two years (as expected) so Negative SEO pointed at this site has killed any chance of me building 'useful' but lower quality links to the site, even if I wanted to.

Today's negative SEO efforts now look almost indistinguishable from genuine backlink building efforts a few years ago – but that's the point – negative SEO efforts want to make it look like YOU built the links yourself – when they submit your site to Google next month to get you penalised for a year.

That kind of negative SEO WILL work.

Seriously.

It was a great move by Google to turn the game on its head – and get SEO fighting themselves to kill cheap linkbuilding.

Fortunately, the truth is, if you work on your site and put a bit – OK a massive amount – of effort into creating a unique offering, you can still win top rankings and better traffic, month on month, while your competition is chased down by Google's algorithms.

If you are totally new to building links to your website – I'd recommend you focus on creating the best page on the web for what you want to rank for – and then think 'where is my next *great* link prospect'.

Or – find a good link prospect with a history of linking out, and create content for them to attract links.

Google might have said recently (when they agreed with Bing) – a good link is a link you don't know where it's coming from. I don't agree with that in every case because I have spent

a career looking for links on really good, relevant sites and thinking ‘I would love a link on there’ and then creating content that might get me that link. For me – an editorial link is just that – editorial. If I put content in front of someone and THEY CHOOSE to link to it freely – that’s editorial enough for me, and a good way to track down some links – even today. Haven’t authors *always* yearned to be cited by the media, and specific media journals?

You can also identify the types of great content being linked to in your niche – and emulate that, to chase down similar links. If you want to rank in Google with any confidence in the long-term, you are going to have to INVEST in GOOD, IN-DEPTH content, and a few GREAT links. If you don’t want to do that – you better hire a great black hat spammer and get some backup domains at the ready.

The number of low-quality links pointing at your site will affect your rankings adversely, and I’ve not seen many paid links age well. Eventually – those unnatural links will catch up with you. Get links from REAL sites that don’t sell links and you’ll soon see results.

In 2016, I’d rather have NO links and lots of content than lots of unnatural links pointing to a site I care about. You can ALWAYS pick up the odd decent link to good content.

I spent the last months cleaning up my blog, for this is ‘new seo’.

This page is an example. I deleted some old posts on the Hobo blog, reworked some out of date advice, merged similar content.

I added some videos from Google, who now advise on the subject-matter where they once did not, and I created this in-depth page that, I hope, is of some use for beginners wishing to market a website successfully in Google in 2016.

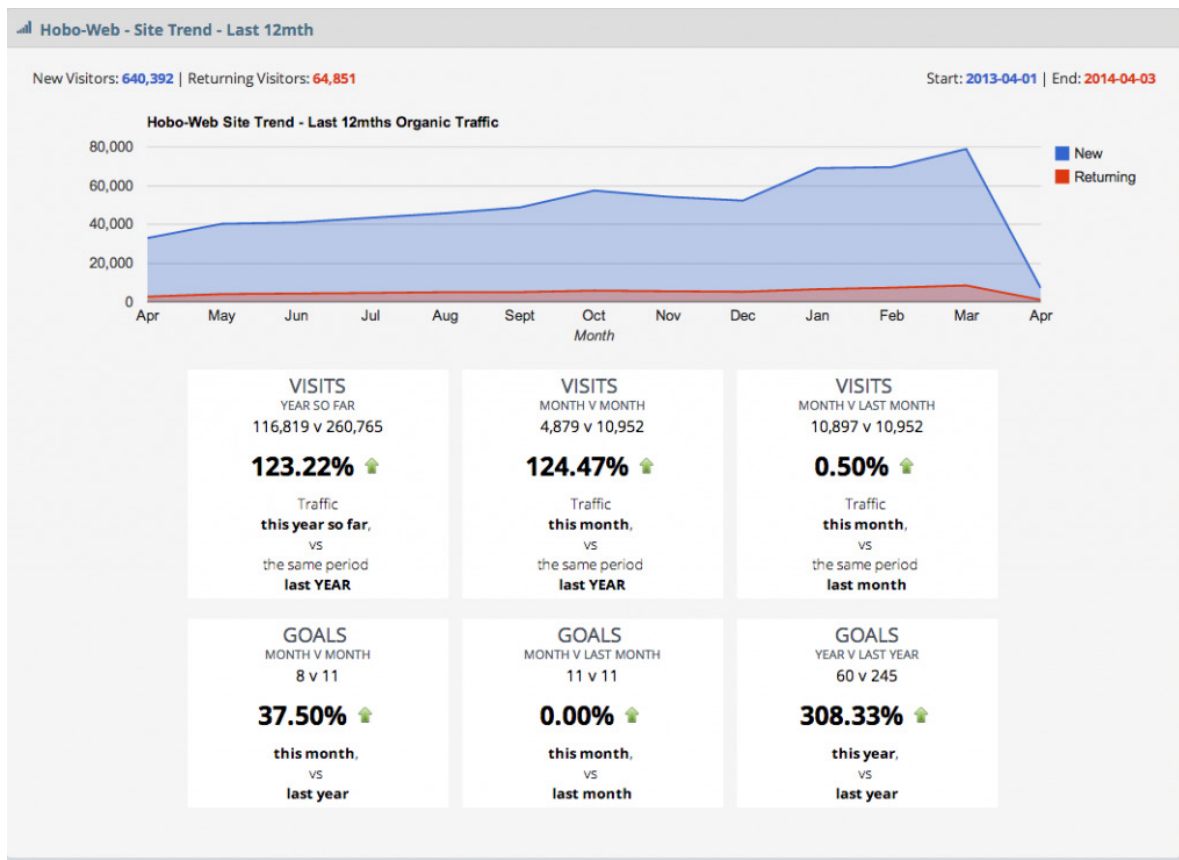
I’m essentially focused on creating content these days – and I recommend you do the same (to start with, at least). I expect this post will stand as an epitaph to my lower quality linkbuilding days of old – I don’t expect to be publishing again on this topic.

I didn’t want any links advice on my blog that could hurt someone’s business.

Most of my posts from this point forward will deal with offering a **UNIQUE** offering via traditional efforts focused on IMPROVING TRUST and RELEVANCE SIGNALS, meeting USER EXPECTATIONS and QUERY SATISFACTION – the essence of search engine optimisation in 2016.

At any rate – this type of optimisation is what I have forced myself to reacquaint myself with since Penguin 2012.

Because – even after a penalty – you can still increase free traffic from Google month on month **without** old school link building techniques (or adding much new content as my case below illustrates when I was working on it):



Over the last few years, I wanted to see if plain old SEO still worked – that is – SEO without unnatural links – and I effectively had to do it without publishing new content. Some bloggers did [notice](#), however.

But before that, let us look at the big traders or the warren buffets of this world. Neil Patel, Shaun Anderson, [Jacob King](#) are top search results when you type anything related to “SEO”, try it!. The tips & tricks of these masters influence many websites.

Including one or two of [my peers](#):

Interestingly, you can easily see which sites you are in competition with in the SERPs by looking for similar ranking keywords. Take for example [Hobo-Web.co.uk](#) – which I would say is a really good ranking site for SEO terms in the UK:

[and](#)

Everything I learned about SEO was from books, videos and by following the work of a select few really good SEO professionals such as Shaun Anderson, [Martin Macdonald](#) and [Rishi Lakhani](#).

I haven't blogged recently (and I've been a hermit on social media too) because I have spent the last year and a half doing nothing but focusing on the same areas for clients, too, after testing it all out on the Hobo site.

The good news for me is YES – the kind of SEO I love to practice still works – but the bad news for some people is – it's a LOT OF WORK.

Lasers – A Metaphor I used to explain Links to beginners

Google often still relies on links to find, index, categorise and rate websites (and pages) in 2016.

Content will always be king (especially in the future) but without links, content can still be a moot point.

You can have the best content in the world, but if you don't have links pointing to it from other sites, it may lose out to *optimised* content on 'hotter' sites, even if that content is of poorer quality.

To properly visualise this 'lasers' or "SEO heat" analogy, you've got to accept success in search engines for competitive terms comes down very largely to links – the number of links, the number of right links... the number of 'hot' links.

Links are like lasers. A link to another site "heats" that site up a little. Links have the potential to make a site hot, and send that site to the top of the results.

Some links get hotter in time, some get colder, and some disappear as each site is affected by those linking to it and from it.

With this constant shift, every site's heat signature is in constant flux, and there's little you can do to it except getting more of the right links to keep your site hotter than the competition for particular terms.

Some burn hot and then go cold, and vice versa.

OK – Now Forget about the links. That's been worked out – Google's counted the links, and filtered the crap.

In the diagram below, you can see in any collection of pages, there is natural heat, naturally hot and cold sites, because of the natural interlinking going on between pages.

In this model, popular sites are hotter than unpopular sites, and this is a reflection of the real web

Hot Sites, A Heat Signature and Those Out In The Cold

So Google now has Hot sites in its index, and Cold sites.

Everywhere in-between, Google has sites that generate some “*heat signature*”.

Hot sites are well known and well linked to and more likely to rank for any term if a page is properly optimised on-page and via the internal navigation structure of the website.

Hot sites are relatively trusted to inject content “directly” into Google’s index, especially if it’s “unique”, probably with a good amount of natural words to keywords.

‘Cold’ sites are not well connected (by links) to any neighbourhood or heat signature and virtually invisible in Google, except for very specific terms.

Hot sites are authoritative and trusted.

Cold sites are sites starved of heat, with a linking profile that’s very cold. Hello, *Google Supplemental Index*! Or whatever Google calls it in 2016.

A hot site has the *potential* to rank in Google SERPs regardless of site-theme & domain relevance although from my observations these ‘irrelevant’ pages can disappear in time.

Over the years – Google has done a really good job of balancing domain authority, relevance and a whole host of other ranking factors to spread that free traffic about and stop sites ranking for terms they probably should not rank for (think, *Google Panda*).

If its on-site architecture is tuned to promote a certain term leading to an optimised page, it will rank – if the page itself meets [2015 ranking requirements on page quality, utility and user experience](#).

Why Google Hates Paid Links

Google hates paid links because it is an obvious way to generate heat signature, and ranking ability, a site might not deserve.

Identifying one or two hot sites, and purchasing links on hot pages within that site, is enough to ignite an “undeserving” site and entire network and send it to the top of the SERPs.

Google likes it natural, because that way, we do Google’s work for it and identify hot sites by linking to them. One thing is for sure, though.

If Google were confident they could via algorithmic calculation clearly identify paid links, the whole internet marketing industry would not have been talking about the war on paid links.

In this example we see a hot site linking to a cold site – instantly generating a heat source on this new site.

This is not natural in Google’s eyes. It’s not democratic in ‘that’ sense..

An Example Of A ‘Hot’ Site

Wikipedia is an example of a hot site. Everybody links to it.

It’s probably one of the hottest sites on the planet alongside Google, regarding link equity.

Wiki ranks for just about anything, and could be optimised further to rank for everything – (and not ONLY because it’s a REAL AUTHORITY – it’s an INFORMATION site! Many critics ask if this the real reason Google ranks Wikipedia at the top of a LOT of TRANSACTIONAL SERPs).

Of course, Wiki’s a natural phenomenon now.

It has links from cold sites and hot sites in both related and unrelated markets.

Features Of A Hot Site

- A hot site is one, which a lot of sites link to it from other sites, all with a different heat signature.
- Hot sites can rank for anything if a page on the site is optimised in both the architecture of the site and on-page SEO.
- Hot sites are natural phenomenon created by other sites linking to them – the more popular the site, the more hot and cold links it will accumulate. Its possible neighbourhood and relevance are just natural occurrences of sites dividing the heat up within a particular network.
- Hot sites link to other hot sites. Generally speaking, a hot site won’t link to a typically cold site unless that site has content on it that’s nowhere else or is “new”, in turn making that a hot(ter) site. e.g. a high-quality site rarely links to a spam site.

What You Need To Do To Get More Visitors From Google

Let's assume your page is optimised, you need heat. The hotter a site, or rather page, the better the link for your site.

If a keyword is in the anchor text of the link, even better, but only if it is an EDITORIAL LINK, in 2016. Most 'link builders' build 'brand' links these days (links without important keywords in them).

The problem is, the easiest links to find out there are on pages with very cold, or at least very diluted heat signatures.

It'll take a lot of these to get hot – and now – too many 'cold' links could be a sign of unnatural link activity – and they often leave a nasty footprint Google can easily identify!

The Basics

When you are not spamming the algorithm, and the Google web spam team is not on holiday, ranking in Google today is about patience, ACCESSIBILITY, RELEVANCE, REPUTATION, USER EXPERIENCE and above all – TRUST – however Google works that last one out.

It is evident Google wants to reward UNIQUENESS – because that scales not.

I prefer focusing on improving those signals above, rather than just manipulating link popularity. A link building campaign devoid of any quality, or of any use (or 'value add') to anyone, is not the type of back link profile Google wants to reward with any long term consistency.

Google calls that spam, and will punish you for it if it detects an intent to deceive its algorithms. Not that that stops a good spammer of course. If you're reading this, chances are you are not a good spammer, so I would keep it clean until you know what you are doing.

And maybe even then.

How to do high-quality link building that works:

- Get links from real sites to build real domain authority. It doesn't hurt to get a link from a low or high Google Page Rank page. Today's No-PR page might be a PR 5 page in reality as Google Toolbar Pagerank is out of date, and not a metric to bet your house on.

- Try and get links from authority websites in your niche. Find that circle of sites – the hub – where authorities in your industry link to and are linked from and think about how you can get involved.
- Don't worry too much about "theme" of websites linking to you but stay clear of irrelevant sites just for irrelevant links. In fact – going off topic once in a while on your blog can lead to great natural links from unrelated sites.
- Review the link building tactics your competitors employ to EARN links and think about how you can emulate the better quality strategies you may find. Don't build links just to build links, or just to copy somebody else.
- Join social networks, not for the links themselves, but to get your content noticed by the people most likely to share your type of content, to build your personal network, and to build your 'Authorship' signal – you're going to need those for the future!
- Get links from relevant sites, but understand that ANY editorial link is a good link, regardless of the page and site it is on (unless it's a negative SEO attack of course).
- Focus on quality link building techniques and strategies to avoid future unnatural links notices in Google Webmaster Tools which will be followed by penalties that can last – well – forever – depending on what you have been up to
- Don't annoy folk with link begging emails and, for sure, not without a good piece of content for them, and don't bombard friends you make on social networks with your sales message.
- Help others achieve their goals today, and some will help you in the future. I've always found that to be a simple truth.
- The more people abuse certain links, the faster they turn toxic. Don't go with that link herd because you, as a beginner, will be the weakest in it.
- Automated link building or manual link building – if the end-result is an unnatural link you've placed yourself, Google doesn't want to count that
- Outsource link building with extreme caution in 2016.
- If you want links, you had better have 'linkable assets', 'e.g., pages on your website need to be a 'destination'.

Which Search Engine Gives The Best Advice?

Unless you have no clue about what is going on and think GooglePlus counts are the number one ranking factor, you'll realise **building high-quality links to your site is STILL the single most important thing you can be doing to improve the rank of an already relevant page** (if you haven't been doing anything shady in the past, that is. If you have, you need to concentrate on dissociating yourself first from unnatural links).

In competitive verticals – you can easily follow Bing/Yahoo clear linkbuilding guidelines to rank in Google, but forget to try and rank in Bing/Yahoo with this same technique because to do so, you need to use Google Webmaster Guidelines as a rulebook for success, and that will penalise you in Google, which no sensible person wants.

Bing and Yahoo recently encouraged you to outreach for relevant links to improve the rank of your website: [Bing](#) said:

“simply ask websites for them”

[Yahoo](#) said:

“Correspond with webmasters of related sites and other providers of relevant content in order to increase the number of links to your site.”

Google has a different view. [Google](#) says:

“**Any** links intended to manipulate ...a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme and a violation of Google's Webmaster Guidelines. Additionally, **creating links that weren't editorially placed** or vouched for by the site's owner on a page, otherwise known as unnatural links, can be considered **a violation of our guidelines**.

Two of the 3 major (UK) search engines (recently) encouraged you to ask websites for links to improve the ranking of your site, and the biggest, Google, tells you not to do it at all.

Bing's SERPs (which power Yahoo searches) look pre-penguin and pre-EMD (Exact Match Domain Update) Google SERPs.

You can easily rank in Bing and tank in Google, these days.

Actionable Advice From Yahoo and Bing: Get links from related sites. Ask for links to increase the number of links to your site. (quotes)

Honesty From Google If we spot a linkbuilding footprint we will f*** you. (paraphrased)

Bing's Position on Backlink Building Clarified

Here's a [post](#) on link building and SEO for “smart webmasters” on the Bing search blog.

- *You contact webmasters of other, related websites and let them know your site exists.*
- *If the value that you have worked so hard to instill in your site is evident to them, they will assist their own customers by linking back to your site. **That, my friend, is the essence of link building.***
- *Relevance is important to end users... We see the content they possess and the content you possess. If there is a clear disconnect, the value of that inbound link is significantly diminished, if not completely disregarded.*
- *If relevance is important, the most highly regarded, relevant sites are best of all. Sites that possess great content, that have a history in their space, that have earned tons of relevant, inbound links – basically, the sites who are authorities in their field – are considered authoritative sites.*
- ***When probable manipulation is detected, a spam rank factor is applied to a site, depending upon the type and severity of the infraction.** If the spam rating is high, a site can be penalized with a lowered rank. If the violations are egregious, a site can be temporarily or even permanently purged from the index.*

Interesting and it gives an insight into linkbuilding and penalties for manipulation – we know the same sort of thing is happening at Google too. **Bing's policy on link building**

Bing's position on link building is straightforward – we are less concerned about the link building techniques used than we are about the intentions behind the effort. That said, techniques used are often quite revealing of intent.

That ‘spam rank factor’ is interesting . I wonder if Google has a similar approach – it certainly feels like it..

Building Links Is Easier When You Have Content Worth Linking To

Getting other sites to link to yours is easy when you have content worth linking to. It is that simple in some cases.

Your content should be original, but it doesn't need to set the world on fire. The more content you add to your site, the more likely people will link to it, today or in the future.

I'm still getting links from stuff I wrote years ago. So the first thing you should be doing is adding high-quality content to your site.

I think *How-To* articles, or articles that discuss a common problem often discussed in forums, etc. – some call it *evergreen*, *timeless*, *in-depth* or *flagship* content – is best suited to link-bait (and visitors!).

High-quality In-depth content is always going to get linked to or shared on social, at some point if it's presented slightly differently, and interesting.

Once you get enough links, and you feature in the top 3 results, you'll find you start to pick up more and more natural links.

Where to start?

See that little FAQ on your site? That page needs to be improved. Each FAQ *could* be an individual page with a good page title, which meets its purpose, in a well-structured site.

Alternatively – you could turn a smaller FAQ into a long-form in-depth content piece focused on the topic at hand.

You are reading one of these expanded FAQ now.

You need to ask yourself what do people want to know about your products, or your industry – not just your business. And you need to add that content to your website.

Having content on your site makes it so much easier to pick up links. If you have no content, while you can still rank in Google via links alone, you're limiting yourself in a way you might not recover from. Try not to add content to your website that's not just about your boring company. Most folks are not interested.

Remember – Google wants to reward UNIQUENESS. It's a pretty simple extrapolation to mean that translates into unique IN-DEPTH – or LONG FORM, INFORMATIVE PAGE COPY and guess what – that type of content picks up links when it DOES rank in Google.

Tell The World About Your Site But Don't Ask For Links!

Google used to say:

Have other relevant sites link to yours.

Then it's guidelines changed to:

Tell the world about your site. [Google](#)

and in 2016:

create unique, relevant content that can naturally gain popularity in the Internet community. Creating good content pays off: Links are usually editorial votes given by choice, and the more useful content you have, the greater the chances someone else will find that content valuable to their readers and link to it. [Google](#)

It's clear.

Google does not want you asking specifically for links or building links you make yourself because this is a clear attempt to manipulate rankings. It's a bit slack advice when the *key* to ranking and traffic success in Google is getting other relevant authority sites link to your site.

Links are what the web is about though, and it is why Google is the number 1 search engine. Links were about before Google, though. There's nothing wrong with getting other sites to link to you as long as it doesn't stick out like a sore thumb you're looking for Pagerank or improved rankings for particular terms. *Private discussions with people you know are another thing*, but when I ask for links (which I don't do very often), I no longer ask for specific keyword anchor text.

If I send out an email, I'll point someone in the direction of the page, and I'll point out that linking to it might have some benefit to their audience. On some occasions in the (long gone) past, I've offered to reciprocate the link IF it is of benefit to the readers of the other page. I never specify any attribute of the link either e.g. whether or not it is search engine friendly, or not. I would not go on record these days sending an email out saying:

Link to me using the following keyword text on a page with Pagerank of minimum 2....

... and neither should you.

You never know who will end up reading that, and it makes it clear *you don't have a clue* what you are on about and *will take links from and link back to anybody*.

If you want people to link to you in a particular way, make sure the title of the page you want links to, has the keywords you want to rank for featured, and a lot of folks will use those words to link to you. I sometimes change the title of pages for this exact reason.

This is presuming, of course, the page is useful in some way!

And don't send out spam email requests. I have had thousands of bottom-feeder link requests, and I don't answer any of them.

It is a waste of time for most of us – and harmful in the long-run.

There are many ways to skin a cat of course, but this is how my linkbuilding company does it – and as I've said before, we're a *content-focused* link building agency.

We don't build links to crap sites in 2016 (not even crap links).

How do you tell the world about your site?

Twitter. Stumbleupon. Facebook. TV. Press Ads. Articles. Blogging. LinkedIn.

You pick – but start with building something on your website somebody will find useful.

That is the start point.

Get Links From REAL Sites (Sites That Do NOT Exist JUST To Link To Other Sites)

Sometimes it's hard to explain to people what a quality link is but in simple terms in 2016 Google wants you thinking nothing but a *natural* link is a *good* link.

Links **do not have to be relevant to your industry to build your domain reputation** (far from it).

The linking site you earn a link from doesn't have to be an authority in its niche, and it doesn't have to be the same links as your competitors to get the same rankings.

Even if the site is unrelated to your site (and you just bagged a lucky link on a well-managed website) – THAT is a GREAT link in 2016.

Any editorial link is a good link.

What it should NOT be is **a website (or websites) that ONLY exist to provide links to other sites to boost rankings.**

Sites that are designed just to link out to other websites to help seo are toxic in 2016 and Google has a bit of an after-hours hobby of going after a lot of [link schemes](#) in these days.

Just about every link building specialist, I talk to today, LOVES EARNED LINKS – loves white hat link building – although a lot of experienced link builders just won't give up on manufactured links while spam prevails in Google's listings – and there's a lot of that, still.

I think about how I get links from real sites, and the more authoritative the site, the better, of course.

Ideally:

- You don't just want a link on a useful links page, but as long as the links page is a valuable resource, and not abusing anchor text, then it could still be a good link – perhaps even a *great* link

- You don't want your link on a page, on a site, openly selling links as chances are the links will not age well, at least.
- You do want it on a page that's in Google's index, on a legitimate website that ranks in Google for what is in the title tag.

Earned contextual links are the holy grail of building links, for me, but if the link is on a good domain, with a high PR and is not abusing anything, just about any link is a great link.

If you want to [increase Google Pagerank](#) of your site, you better make sure the pages that link to you have PR, can transfer it and are making your link the focus of the article.

This takes a bit of experience, though.... you'll naturally accrue Pagerank if you invest in remarkable or compelling content on your site – and that can take just about any form you can think of.

Do the stuff above (and a lot of it) and you'll have a natural link profile as is possible that will probably stand the test of time. I don't use that many link building tools to identify opportunity because I don't want the same links as my competitors for my clients – you just need Google and your brain, in some cases.

There's many ways to SEO the cat (and I don't IGNORE competitor research), but if I was a link builder picking through competitors back links instead of trying to think a bit more creatively about building a brand online, I think I would shoot myself in the head. I filter competition backlinks and identify quality linking patterns – but often, competitor research is best for inspiration, rather than bagging the same link.

Focus on building better content, a better user experience, and get links from REAL SITES. Remember that....and you will probably always be ok.

Go Off Topic & Get Natural Links From Trusted Sites

A lot of SEO & Internet marketing blogs will say pump out a lot of relevant content on your blog, build a resource all around a specific subject.

Even Google says to do the same.

What you won't normally hear is to improve your traffic, improve the number and quality of your links to your website is to go slightly **off topic**.... write about anything that is timely – especially when it's even slightly topical.

News-jacking stories ****in related**** niches (or your own) is still a great way of picking up natural, socially driven links.

I've gone off topic on a number of times to chase links. Because of that, I've been linked to by authority sites that wouldn't have any reason to link to an SEO company.

I had a PR 9 link once because I wrote about something '*slightly*' off topic.

Recently I was editorially linked to, from a .edu on a '*slightly*' off topic subject to an article I wrote two years ago.

Once our site got a home page link on what I can only determine was the Brazilian version of TechCrunch and sent me nearly 5,000 visitors on a link that was buried four pages in on the article (to an article that was a year old).

The link was to a '*slightly*' off-topic post on my site that ranks pretty good because of my domain authority – and that new link will only increase that domain authority.

When you go off topic into less competitive niches, you can sometimes have a better chance of ranking on the first page of Google – and so – pick up natural links even further down the line.

The Best Way To Earn Natural Links Is TO Be Top Of Google!

Ranking no1 in Google makes natural link building that much easier!

If you are the number 1 link in a SERP, you wouldn't believe the amount of natural links you get just because you are already No1 – it truly is a self re-enforcing effect and can be a powerful way to attract links over time.

The number 1 position truly is a self-reinforcing position especially if there's any semblance of a natural linking profile in that particular keyword vertical – i.e., tutorials, research, how-to, etc. So – a strategy is to rank for as much as possible from the start – even if that is LONG-TAIL queries – and so that starts with IN-DEPTH CONTENT on YOUR SITE. If you are building links to 500-word articles – that's not going to stand the test of time over even the next year or two.

These links from trusted sites help ranking your content – especially your new content. A natural link from a trusted site (or even a more trusted site than yours) can do nothing but help your site. I would think when a trusted site links to your site, the trust Google places in your site because of that link raises your trust levels, and while not helping you rank immediately for your main terms, can help you when you publish new content in the future. Of course, if the off topic trusted site links to you with good keywords, you don't get much better.

The art is to pull all that together in a way that benefits you the most, without giving Google a reason to place less trust in your site.

Now for sure, I don't go that far off topic and expect to get links that will count.

But indeed, **going off topic every now and again, especially with a helpful article on your blog** certainly gets you links, sometimes tons of traffic, some you wouldn't normally receive in your boring niche.

You know you can monetise anything if you can be bothered and take advantage of any page that's been linked to heavily, but the point is the natural links you earn from this type of activity might well be the only links you need to beat off a competitor.

Sometimes – it's surprising the quality of links you get with a bit of off-topic content.

Links That Affect Ranking Change In Google SERPs

Any link that sends you traffic could be seen as a good link, but what are quality links, what are good links and what are crap links, when it comes to improving the actual ranking of your pages in Google SERPs?



First, you need to be aware that **the quality of a link (that affects a ranking improvement for your site in Google) is dependant on the page the link is found and site it is on.**

Is the site trusted, is the page trusted, is the page in Google's index at all, how many links point to the actual page your link is on, are people going to click this link (that in itself is a good measure of the quality of a real link)? Most importantly, it's all about the page the link is on.

Just because you get a link on a high PR domain does not automatically make that a useful link.

It's the *page* you need to evaluate, and how important that page is on the site.

Testing Google

Google used to tell you through their cache results if a link was being 'counted' at least in some fashion.

Back in Nov 2011, Google removed the cached message:

“these terms only appear in links pointing to this page“

While this was regularly an inaccurate statement for the cached pages to declare I always found this information in cached pages useful – when looking at backlink profiles to investigate weird ranking results – or ranking anomalies/false positives – that shed light on how Google worked on some level.

This feature of Google cache was also very useful when testing, for example, [first link priority](#).

It was also helpful to investigate *why* a page ranked for a keyword, for instance, when the word was not on the actual page.

You could often catch a glimpse of backlink building efforts that worked looking at this – which led to a few surprises, more often than not.

Now Google cache only tells us:

These search terms are highlighted:

Pity.

Another small window on determining how Google might ‘work,’ at a granular level, disappeared to lead to more obfuscation.

Which Links Are Worth Addressing?

You should have a light mixture of focused anchor text links, unfocused anchor text links and URL citations (www.hobo-web.co.uk, etc.) in your link profile to ensure long standing rankings (e.g., a natural link profile).

What follows is my general rule of thumb:

1. **Your internal links** Not THE most important links, but the best place to start. Get your site in order before you get links. Google loves a good site structure with plenty of text links pointing to each page on your site. I prefer a minimal site-wide navigation and a lot of in content links if you have a lot of useful content, and I consider all the time if Google is only counting the first link on a page. Don’t forget to [link to your important pages often](#) – ENSURE your get them into Google’s index in the first place.
2. **Links on mainstream news sites**, and other types of authority sites – or in short, links from Brands – the holy grail in my opinion – promotion, old style. Purely because they are trusted and have a lot of links to them.
3. **Related industry site** (the aim of SEO, and excellent quality, but depends on the site, niche and the type of link – can be very useful) – usually, they too have a lot of links.

4. **Link on a high PR old style aged trusted page** – like a university or government resource page – excellent if you can get the webmaster to link to you
5. **Links from unrelated but non-abusive sites** (depends on the site and the type of link – can be very useful for improving your Google ranking & PR)
6. **Link on a blog post** (good, but dependent on the site, but easily *deteriorates* over time as a post is gobbled up in sometimes very crap site architecture.
7. **Social media site links** (opinion, I think these are very weak as a ranking signal in themselves, but they do get your page out there, and that's how you pick up organic links).
8. **Link on a useful links page** (often very low-quality, but sometimes very high-quality – it's all dependent on the INTENT of that page in question, and the quality of the site it is on).
9. **Reciprocal links** (often abused and very low-quality, but sometimes just a natural part of the link graph)

Links to *avoid* include any link that is self-made and obviously self-made, on a site with only self-made links.

It doesn't matter if THEY WORK to manipulate Google in the short term – if you use a lot of low-quality techniques, and there is an obvious INTENT to rank using low-quality means, these links might very well cause you ranking troubles a few months later.

I would avoid:

1. **Dofollow Blog Comments – PENALTY MATERIAL**
2. **Site wide links & blogrolls** (generally low-quality in terms of anchor text transference – used to be good for PR transference but not nearly as useful as it used to be) **PENALTY MATERIAL**
3. **Article submission & syndication services – PENALTY MATERIAL**
4. **Directory Links – PENALTY MATERIAL**
5. **Forum Signatures** (generally low-quality, dependent on page and forum, perhaps dependant on number of links too) **PENALTY MATERIAL**
6. **Widgets – PENALTY MATERIAL**
7. **Unnatural Sitewide links – PENALTY MATERIAL**
8. **Blog Networks, Directory networks** and just about any other type of **link network**
9. **Any Unnatural Links – Potential Penalty Material, Eventually**
10. **Paid Links, of any sort** (if you are rumbled)

I will say you can still get away with quite a lot, but actual penalty material as I claim above is all to do with your INTENT as GOOGLE interprets it to be.

Nofollowed links (like those on most blog comments – are not counted as links (though can be used to generate traffic if you link to a popular blog post or comment on one). NOTE many claim Google DO follow nofollow links in certain cases – but I perform SEO not expecting nofollowed links to have much impact on my rankings either way. If they do – good – but I don't *rely* on them.

Remember that links need to be complimented by well-structured title tags, GOOD IN-DEPTH content, and a good site architecture.

It's not enough to be 'popular' – you also need to be 'relevant' and 'unique'.

For me, another rule of thumb is, often, the EASIER a link is, that everyone else can get, the LESS quality it is for you in the long run.

Assimilate Competitors Successful Strategies For Natural Back Links

As part of my analysis, I ALWAYS scan competitors back links to see if they have managed to earn any quality links and determine how they did it and if it can be replicated.

In 2016 – **you are only looking for the very best links**. You don't want to engage in any low-quality SEO techniques just to take on one or two competitors. It's not worth it – you're probably better off just outing your competitor on Google's forums (or competing with them with another domain).

Seriously.

Should I Buy Links To Improve Google Rankings?

SHORT ANSWER – Probably, not sensible – ESPECIALLY NOT IF THEY LOOK LIKE PAID LINKS!

Buying links that are search engine friendly and “flow Pagerank” is against Google TOS.

If you buy links, you take the risk that Google will penalise you for unnatural links.

If buying links were ineffective, it wouldn't be against Google TOS. Think about what that means.

I can't remember the last vertical I checked there weren't people buying links to improve search engine placement – so the competition is doing it. Last time I checked, they were ranking pretty good, but it's not all plain sailing in 2016.

Google is getting better at dealing with some form of paid links. It depends on what you are trying to achieve – although I will point out again, Google will take you down if it finds out.

If you are buying links, make sure your links aren't obviously paid links, though.

That is, don't buy links from prominent places. If Google gets better at detecting these, it's the obvious paid links that will be hit first.

I can say, I don't buy links, and I would recommend you not do either.

It is too risky at the moment in 2016, and there are still plenty of ways to get links without paying for them.

NOTE – Link Sellers Are Rarely Discreet

I don't 'out' individuals for SEO tactics, and I don't 'out' the myriad of purveyors of link prospects who contact me every day, non-stop.

Here's why.

This one takes some beating, from a MIDDLE EASTERN NEWSPAPER:

Hello, The (A MIDDLE EASTERN NATIONAL NEWSPAPER) is currently offering outside companies to purchase links from within our articles. To place a bid, simply send a document with the keywords you would like to purchase, and your price bid. Feel free to search the site for yourself, to find the perfect article for you. Since we are just starting this venture, we have no fixed price, thus you can choose the amount of links, period of time, and so on. **We are allowing the first 1000 S.E.O. companies to send in their bids**, without the limitation of a starting price. We will accept lucrative offers. Mind you, we also sell conventional links, such as: * Link on "sites of xxxxxxxx" (footer of master page) priced @ \$500 per month (6 months minimum). * Text link on the home page priced @ \$1,300 per month. * Text link on the inner pages priced @ \$1,000 per month. Once a bid is accepted, you will be contacted by a sales representative, to process the campaign's details. Have a good day, (REMOVED).

I looked at the available links, and sure enough, a list of totally unrelated sites.

Visibly Paid links.

Now, say I see one of my competitors in there?

I could just report the site for selling links and my competitors for buying them (not that I bother with that).

Or I could out them on a public blog.

Lucky I don't 'out' SEO tactics is because I think outing SEO tactics is self-serving and slimy.

If I did buy links in footers like this (which I don't), I wouldn't be happy there was an email to 1000 SEO companies telling THEM my clients was buying links.

Would a rival newspaper use this information against you too if they new, especially given the polarising nature of your content (again, not that it bothers me)?

If you are buying or selling links that are search engine friendly you better be doing it more covertly than this..... you need to build relationships to get decent links, even like the ones above.

Start, for instance, with a private email address, and open up a conversation before you show folks what you have got? I sent the email back with a link to this post to see what they say..... DOH!_

Note – expectedly – these newspaper websites soon got hit by Google – the first public indicator being a lack of toolbar Pagerank.....

I've long thought it quite funny the situation between the mainstream media v Google.

Some media sites say it's all one-sided, and Google are stealing their content, are putting up pay-walls, even when SEO have been saying for years about how Google is falling over themselves giving them tons of trust, tons of traffic AND making their links some of the most valuable on the web.

Google uses big trusted sites like news media sites, and their links, to help them sort out the cesspool of the web (when they Google is not ranking news sites own content above smaller businesses). A quick look around some newspapers websites (the top UK ones) and some of the SEO efforts are shocking – they don't even seem to know how to make subdomains rank well.

Yes, some newspaper sites HAVE woken up to the fact they have massive domain authority and are rolling out everything from dating sites to – wow – low-quality business directories.

I would do some of that too I suppose. I mean Google has made newspaper sites authority sites in niches like online dating.

A quick look around some local newspapers too and you see they don't link out to anyone, anywhere. Oh wait – there's some paid link articles to personal injury lawyers lol and an advertising network of links that have clearly affected the site's 'trust'.

Yeah – you need to know when to get out of those things before it goes t*ts up as they say in Scotland.

I don't buy links but at the same time, I don't think it's hypocritical to say the least that search engines frown on bloggers selling links and do little to deter newspaper sites obvious link selling tactics.

Some newspaper sites are so stupid they send out crazy link selling emails too, like above, and indeed, some folk [do out them](#). The fact is – **only SHOCKINGLY bad – not just bad – SEO will get these sites penalised** in a NOTICEABLE WAY – and even then – only if outed, then a discussion about inappropriate domain authority, in particular, niches might focus the spotlight.

I don't out SEO strategies, but I wonder if it's worth examining newspaper SEO in the future. They do make a business of outing folk. Right?

To be honest at this time, I think like a link builder, it's more appropriate **NOT to out others under just about any circumstances**, but it is something I think about.

It's probably more useful to think how you are possibly going to combat mega domain authority gate crashes impact on your business, or in turn, work out how you can look like a brand to Google.

Guess what – that often involves links from newspaper / big media websites.

Reciprocal Links With Unrelated Websites

Another question I get asked daily.

Many new clients send me unsolicited emails from companies that ask for “reciprocal links between their site and yours”, usually because it will “improve search engine rankings” for both websites. I can tell you I usually **ignore all reciprocal link exchange requests via unsolicited emails** and recommend you do to.

I spend some of my time looking for quality links and believe me; I’ve not found ANY in any email as I describe above.

It’s also against Google TOS to do this type of reciprocal link exchange:

Your site’s ranking in Google search results is partly based on analysis of those sites that link to you. The quantity, quality, and relevance of links count towards your rating. The sites that link to you can provide context about the subject matter of your site, and can indicate its quality and popularity. However, some webmasters engage in link exchange schemes and build partner pages exclusively for the sake of cross-linking, disregarding the quality of the links, the sources, and the long-term impact it will have on their sites. This is in violation of Google’s webmaster guidelines and can negatively impact your site’s ranking in search results. Examples of link schemes can include.....

- Excessive reciprocal links or excessive link exchanging (“Link to me and I’ll link to you.”)

Now I suppose that’s rich advice coming from a SEO (whose meant to be *manipulating* search engines if you listen to some of the bollocks some big name web designers link-bait with these days).

Reciprocal link exchanges, like the one I mention above offer NO MASSIVE SEO benefit to YOUR site (especially when they are on link partner pages) and Google says link schemes will NEGATIVELY impact your rankings.

IF YOU TAKE A SECOND AND VISUALISE in your head the link scheme in place and the relationship between pages via links in the reciprocal links hub scenario, you can see how easy it is to do so.

Google can probably compute and identify that one a lot faster than you can its so obvious. I IGNORE ALL SPAM EMAILS ASKING FOR RECIPROCAL LINKS especially if they are from some company who sells something totally unrelated to my site.

I honestly can’t even remember the 0.1% I’ve responded to, but I assume I did at least once back in the day – I know I asked for them when I started out over a decade ago, now, but that’s when this type of link was of some use.

Usually, *they* will put your link on a “useful links” page that’s not useful at all to anyone.

A useful links page out to **unrelated** sites on a low-quality domain is just spam to Google and more often or not the pages your links are on will just be ignored by Google, so there is no point getting a link from these pages.

Too many of them and you WILL get a notice of unnatural links.

Unrelated Sites

- Should you reciprocate links with irrelevant, unrelated websites? **NO** – It's a waste of time and potentially damaging.
- Should you link out to other unrelated sites at any other time? **OF COURSE, YOU SHOULD BUT NOT JUST TO MANIPULATE SEARCH RANKINGS.** If the page is relevant to an article on your site, then it's a good link. These types of links are the currency of the web.
- Should you worry if unrelated sites link to you? Generally speaking, **NO**. Although Negative SEO is a concern for some and should be checked out.

Linking is the foundation of the web. Without links, there would be no web as we know it, no Google even, so never be scared of linking to useful sites or pages. In fact, Google WANTS or, at least, EXPECTS you to do this and will thank you for it at some level... probably.

Bear in mind reciprocal links with a website may indicate to Google the two sites are 'related' in some fashion. Do you *really* want that?

One-Way Links

Of course, you should ALWAYS be LOOKING for high-quality links, whether you link back to those sites or not. One-way links are better for ranking in search engines as they indicate editorially approved links from other sites to yours.

That's the best kind of links you can get.

I am working with a client at the moment in a global market that makes something amazing a lot of blue chip companies pay a lot of money for. Their website has a very poor link profile. We are currently asking for them to contact all these big brand companies and ask them for a link on their websites to the client website because this COULD NEVER HURT ANY OF THE SITES INVOLVED and links from these big brand websites who have bought their products – i.e., testimonial links from REAL sites that don't just link to anybody, are good quality links.

We'll probably reciprocate those links (if they ask us) but only AFTER Google sees the big brand sites linking to us first (that's a habit) – I use a few methods to ensure this is the case.

The aim is to get the BRAND websites to VOTE for our site FIRST, so OUR search engine rankings improve, because Google now TRUSTS our site because of these new quality links on sites it already trusts.

The brand websites don't need our links for search engine purposes – all we need to ensure is we are linking out to their sites in a more appropriate manner that is probably more useful to them.... I think all Brand managers would like another good-news-page in the SERPs, so creating a case study for their brand, on your website, is probably better than a link on a links page Google will probably eventually ignore.

Easier to tweet, also.

Reciprocal Links

Scenario: If someone links to my site, and I don't link back to them, that's said to be a good link. A one-way link. When you link back to that site, that's what a reciprocal link is.

If a very trusted site links to my site and gave me a ranking boost, am I expected to believe that linking back to them will remove my ranking boost? I don't believe that to be the case. I don't think it aligns what Google is trying to do (when not trying to make money) – i.e., improve their search results for the end user looking for information (and that the vast majority of Google users).

When a trusted site, or a site with online business authority, links to a site it deems trustworthy and boosts rankings to improve it's SERPs in line with its algorithms, it's not going to dump that site back down the rankings just because it reciprocates. I don't think, anyway.

Linking back to a site that links to you is a very common thing on the web. All these links build your sites trust and authority in Google, which you can unlock with fresh, topical content via a blog for instance – which I think is more useful these days than ranking for some head terms.

Consider the small site that links to its industry body, and a year down the line the small site is a big player, with links from the industry body. Is that link useless? I would think Google is a lot smarter than that, at some level.

I think Google would, at all times, **take into account the trust and authority of the sites** in question, and whether or not it has any reason not to trust the sites. My rule of thumb is I don't mind reciprocating links at all, especially if the other site is more authoritative or is highly relevant to my audience.

I don't use low-quality reciprocal linking between untrusted sites as an actual ranking improvement strategy, whether it works or not.

I never link to a site JUST BECAUSE THEY LINK TO ME, because the chances are, they are linking to ANY site out there regardless or not if it is a bad neighbourhood.

Google reserves the right to penalise you badly if you link to one of these, or are linked from one of them.

So:

- avoid low-quality reciprocal links where possible, and avoid get-links-quick schemes
- try and get other sites to link to you first
- don't worry about reciprocating links with real trusted sites

- don't use reciprocal links as a ranking improvement strategy (most link builders focus on one way linkbuilding)
- don't just link to just anyone, especially just because they link to you

Of course, you could [robots.txt](#) out of [nofollow links](#) you give to other sites but, generally speaking, its bad karma – better to play nice, where possible.

The Perfect Link Building Strategy Is To Mix It Up

The best piece of advice I can give you is to FOCUS ON BUILDING A LINKABLE ASSET and VARY your linking strategy while ensuring to avoid low-quality links.

It's the only way to be sure you'll achieve good rankings, and keep them – which I always thought was the point. Remember that what works today might not work “tomorrow” – so it's worth experimenting while, all the time, hunting for those “quality” links.

Bearing in mind “Content Is King” on the web, no matter how great your content is, no matter how search engine optimised your page is, if you don't have inbound links, you're usually next to nowhere in the Google SERPs. Especially in competitive markets – probably because a competitor has got in there first and generated some content and links before you.

But what is the perfect link?

What is the best linking strategy?

The answer is – everybody has a different view of a perfect link, and everybody has different ways of measuring exactly what a perfect link is.

Here's my take on what I look for when I am link hunting (all, I think worth thinking about and in **no particular order**).

1. Pagerank Did I say Pagerank? Yes. Google Pagerank is still important regardless of what some SEO people claim. Google (well, Matt Cutts, said (a long time ago admittedly) the easiest way to get your internal pages out of the supplemental index (Google's backup listings) is to get PR to those pages. A high Pagerank can also mean your site is crawled more frequently than it might be (good if you are constantly adding content to your website – which of course, you should be doing.) Don't blindly ‘trust’ Pagerank – but it can be a good indicator. If Pagerank is real – it's a great indicator sometimes.

2. Anchor Text Anchor text is simply the text in the link. If I want to rank for something, and I have an optimised page waiting to get links to it, I'd like a link with my actual desired keyword or keyword phrase in the actual link i.e., “link building expert” instead of “click here” or something. My thinking is, I'm not trying to rank for “click here” am I? I would be VERY careful, though – Google is on the lookout for anchor text abuse. I would encourage it, rather than overtly advertise it. For instance – what you put in your page title often ends up in links.... so changing your page title every now and again can mix this up.

3. Contextual Link within text, surrounded by text Google can easily spot a long list of links (like navigation arrays, etc.) so I would always try and get a link from within the actual text on a page, so it looks more “natural”. Ideally, the surrounding text would also be relevant to my page. Sometimes the only sure way of generating these links is to write good content on your site to “force” people to link to you (unless you own the other site of course). These

type of links are in my opinion the creme de la creme of links (which is why some SEO's buy these type of links (I don't).

4. Trust / Authority Trusted sites pass “trust factor”. The thinking is, trusted sites rank well in Google, because they are, well, trusted! (stop me if this gets too complicated!). Trusted authority sites rarely link to spammy sites – they only link to quality, probably related, sites. If you can manage to get a link from a trusted site in your niche, this could be worth its weight in Gold. How do you tell if a website (or page within a website) is trusted? Well, that's the question that's on the lips of every SEO! How do I determine it? Well, if you think simply, if it's all about HTML links, then trust would be calculated by Google by the number and quality of links to that site / web page. Simply, get links from sites with links and pages with links!

5. Relevance / Relationship / Theme How relevant is the page that is linking to you? I mean, if you have a SEO site, are you trying to get links from search engine optimization related websites? Where possible, I'll try and get a link on a page that is actually about the same subject matter as the web page I want a link to. HOWEVER – a site with massive domain trust that has NOTHING to do with my site is still a very powerful link in building your sites REPUTATION.

6. Hub / Neighbourhood Every niche has an authority hub, an inner network of sites every other site in the niche links to. This is the “neighbourhood” a (remarkably!) few SEO, including myself, harp on about. Getting a link from these sites has got to be a good idea in any campaign, as these sites, that Google already trusts and rates, pass along a portion of this “trust” thingy Google calculates. Linking out to these sites is also thought to be useful, as these links determine the online neighbourhood your site resides within.

7. Any old link! Don't get me wrong, I'll take a link from anyone! Feel Free! But links vary in everything from quality and trust etc. – I just spend my time trying to get quality links where possible, and at least from relevant pages. It's these kind of links that will help you in Google. And don't think I dreamt all this up myself. I read a lot of SEO blogs on the subject and try and take a subjective view on what's best for my purposes and what mood I'm in that day and what sounds “[intelligent](#)” to me, and I'm always [experimenting](#) with every option! It's always a good idea to vary your link building strategies, so your not susceptible to massive ranking algorithm changes when one strategy is devalued. The best piece of advice I can give you if you are intent on coming at backlink building from this angle is to vary your linking strategy. Mix it up. It's the only way to be sure you'll achieve good rankings, and keep them. Remember that what works today might not work “tomorrow”. While you're mixing it up, you'll also make it harder for others to reverse engineer your hard work, creating “noise” in the search engines, but I would be VERY CAREFUL in 2016 – avoid unnatural links.

The aim is to get sites with more domain trust to link to you so your domain trust will increase.

The theory is simple. Mix up your anchor text to avoid important links being filtered out of your link profile. But in 2016 – it's got a lot to do with the ratio of low-quality sites involved – rather than just the anchor text used.

“

If you consider that's your link profile, it is probably not that **hard for the smartest people in web spam to pick out your natural links (the INDEPENDENT links Google wants to count)** and ignore, devalue or penalise you for the rest of them.

Directory Submissions

In 2016, I would avoid most, if not all directories. If I did submit a site to any directory, it would meet these criteria from [Google](#):

Directory entries are often mentioned as another way to promote young sites in the Google index. There are great, topical directories that add value to the Internet. But there are not many of them in proportion to those of lower quality. If you decide to submit your site to a directory, make sure its on topic, moderated, and well structured. Mass submissions, which are sometimes offered as a quick work-around SEO method, are mostly useless and not likely to serve your purposes.

I don't think the links are worth paying to be 'reviewed' by, and many of these SEO friendly directories end up turning into low-quality link farms.

One thing's for sure, most directories send you little or no traffic and on their own in little numbers have little impact in SERPs. Directory links are clearly not the type of links Google wants to count as a 'vote' – which render most directory submission services redundant in 2016.

In short – I would not bother with directory submissions at all if you're focusing on creating good content on your site.

It's worth remembering that just because a strategy may work on some level, it still might get you into trouble further down the line. You'll probably end up paying the same company to remove the link next year!

Broken Link Building

Broken linkbuilding is all about hunting for and spotting an opportunity.

A long time ago (site-wide links are not really in fashion now) I used a very simple method to get 500 links from a PR 5 site with over 3000 links to it. Yes, a real site.

I've used the same method to contact ten other sites with the same request about the same matter.

I've used this method a bit over the last couple of years.

Looking at the SERPs I was interested in, I spotted an expired, suspended domain that was ranking for a term I cherished. The site was suspended and had been like that for the last six months.

There was no content on the site, so I knew immediately it was the strength of the incoming back links alone that was keeping this high.

I could of course look to buy the expired domain (but it belongs to a competitor – I'm sure if I expressed a value in it I'd lose out!).

I ran the expired suspended domain through a back link checker, identified the most powerful links, contacted the site owners in question and explained to them:

1. They were linking to a dead site (and had been that way for six months)
2. I had the same (perhaps better and more up-to-date) content on a site that they could link to if they wished.

Not only did I get a friendly email thanking me for pointing out they had broken links on their site (broken links are never a good thing), I now have 500 new links on a real site pointing to my site.

Backlink creation for me is all about opportunity – spotting it and actioning it to get real back links from real sites. If you can see a win-win (something as simple as links in return for pointing out another site has broken links on it) jump on it. If you can't see win-wins – you're not a link builder – hire somebody.

By the way, the result is I now rank and that suspended domain has sunk – oops :)

TIP – Find a site you want a link from, spider it, find broken links – see if you have content that matches it.

Email them (and send them the list of all the broken links).

It's not as easy to find such sites in Google today – but there are many sites out there that discuss this in more detail.

TIP – You can also often find potential broken links in Google Analytics, by looking into any old pages on the site that have been deleted or moved. This process is called **backlink reclamation**.

‘Links To Useful Sites’ Pages

Consider how much value these links are, especially if there are lots (100+) of links on there – as any benefit to your site could be microscopic (and potentially damaging to your rankings if the site in question is of a very low-quality).

Do not buy any of these types of links, and I would AVOID like the plague any of these types of pages where you can spot obvious anchor text abuse, often to unrelated sites.

When you have a choice of where a link is going, don’t just take a link from “useful links” pages, unless the ‘useful links’ page is on a reputable site, with a lot of back-links itself. The more relevant the page is to your business, the better.

There are some indications the ‘useful links’ pages is, after all, helpful’ link:

- Check if the links page is indexed by Google at all utilising the **info** operator – info:www.hobo-web.co.uk
- Consider how authoritative the site is. Is it an important site within your industry or known as a reputable source throughout the world? (If it is, get a link if you can!)
- Check the [Google Toolbar Pagerank](#) of the actual page the link is going to feature on – not just the PR of the home page. Note that Pagerank, or what we see of it, is not a 100% positive proof of the reputation of a website, but it might be an indicator of recent quality.
- Check how many backlinks point to the links page from within the actual site (my favourite linkbuilding tool is probably Majestic SEO, reviewed on my [list of the best SEO tools](#))

Links pages can be a useful target for any link hunter if the page is on a very authoritative site, but a lot of link pages go the way of the Dodo within time.

Avoid Article Marketing Syndication

Article syndication (for search engine optimisation purposes) is a big no-no for me in 2016. You just don't know where that article will end up, or on how many low-quality sites.

I've learned to live without it, after a few years of abusing it a little. I still think the place for your articles should be on your blog, on the whole, to attract traffic and links, and to build your reputation as an authority.

I've always found article syndication useful for finding the odd trusted site willing to link to your content, albeit on a more trusted domain than your own. I once wrote an article that had a signature link back to my site, and while testing how well it had penetrated the SERPs and in how many instances, there was one trusted domain with the content republished, and THAT had attracted a link from a then PR 9 page on a very old trusted site. Bonus!

I immediately contacted the PR 9 (page) site owners and asked them to link to the source of the article, on my site, and they did – which was nice. I also found another couple of sites that were willing to link to that kind of content for future reference. The moral of the story is – track where your content is being published if you publish a lot of it, and watch out article syndication does not backfire on you, if you're using it for SEO purposes.

Be wary of extremely low coast article marketing services, article submissions services & free press releases. In today's SEO, you do not want your article links duplicated across only low-quality domains – and that is where most of these type of articles end up.

Use sparingly and with GREAT caution. The problem is – you lose control of where you syndicate your articles to, and that can turn problematic very quickly. I avoid article submission sites these days. Period.

The first place for your articles is your blog, next, it's getting those article noticed via social media sites.

Avoid Low-Quality Press Releases & Advertorials

Some traditional companies create press releases and don't think for a minute how these could be used to successfully promote their website when syndicated online. Every time you send out a press release, you should be ensuring you're getting a few things right.

For instance, you should know by now you should always include your web address – but you should also include a 'nofollow' tag on any links in 2016.

A big thing to remember in 2016 is to watch Google doesn't think you're intent is to spam their algorithm with press releases. A responsible press release agency will add [rel=nofollow](#) to your links to prevent it from passing Pagerank (and possibly prevent you from getting an *unnatural links notice*, in the future).

Google wants the secondary links (from buzz about the *news* in your press releases) to count toward your ranking, not the actual press release links.

Example: If I were sending out a press release to a third party and relying on them to publish it (which I don't but hey!) I'd previously ensure my web address was in it. I'd ensure my website address was written in the correct manner i.e., <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk> (with the http:// because on some sites they'll automatically make this a link.)

Your web address appearing just like www.hobo-web.co.uk (not a clickable link) won't obviously help in Google rankings when compared to an HTML link.

Be careful publishing too many press releases without [rel=nofollow](#) on the links.

Stay WELL AWAY from anchor text rich article marketing, press releases and advertorials. Google made that clear when they added the following to their guidelines about what not to do:

Links with optimized anchor text in articles or press releases distributed on other sites.

Google published a pretty comprehensive video on advertorials, too (above).

Are Tweets, Facebook Likes & Google Plus Votes the ‘New Links’?

Are tweets or Facebook likes the new links?

Not for me, just yet. I don’t think Google is about to throw away it’s multi-billion a quarter link-count scraper to rank tweets above links. Not just now, and not in isolation.

The idea of people picking the best sites, rather than counting links the traditional way, is an ideal situation, of course. Google certainly has lots of manual quality raters in 2016.

But I don’t see much real evidence of this in competitive verticals so I need to say traditional links are still relied on HEAVILY, by Google at the very least – and what I would prefer if given a choice.

While I don’t think I see much of evidence of tweets having a massive impact (compared to traditional HTML links) in Google’s competitive SERPs – it is worth considering what search engines SAY they are working towards with regards to social ‘buzz’:

The following table was compiled by [web SEO analytics](#) based on an article (some time ago now) at [Search Engine Land](#):

	Google	Bing
Are Regular Search Results affected by social media buzz?	Yes. It is used as a signal especially for news.	Yes, it is a signal. Some weight is passed, and regular results are affected.
Are Social/Realtime Search Results affected by buzz?	Heavily affected	Heavily affected, Authority metrics is used to determine the hot posts.
Are Twitter links taken into account (aka do they pass link juice)?	In some limited situations, the data are used.	The data are used. The weight depends on how often a link is posted, the number of tweets & retweets and the authority of the people that post it.

Are Facebook links taken into account?	The shared links from Fan pages are treated similarly to Twitter links. No links from personal walls are used.	Only the publicly shared links from Fan Pages and Profiles are taken into account.
Is there an Authority Rank for Twitter Profiles?	Yes, the author quality is measured. Google calls this Author Authority.	Yes. Several metrics are taken into account. Bing calls this Social Authority.
Is there an Authority Rank for Facebook Profiles?	They are treated similarly to Twitter Profiles. Note: Normally if this is true, they measure only public profiles like Fan pages.	No. They take into account only the Facebook data that are publicly available.
Does the Twitter Authority have an impact on the weight of the links that are shared?	Yes. The weight depends on the authority of the person. The Author Authority is used in limited situations and it is independent of PageRank.	The Author Authority affects the link weight.
Does the Facebook Authority have an impact on the weight of the links that are shared?	Similarly to Twitter. The weight of each link depends on the authority of the profile.	They don't use Facebook authority. Instead, to find if something is popular, they compare Twitter & Facebook shares.

It's clear that search engines **are looking at social signals** and these WILL only increase in value.

We've been saying this for a long time, though. [Eric Ward](#) calls it right for me:

the rankings effect can be directed at specific known circles, friends, connections, etc. **The one size fits all search result is headed for the museum.** Also, I believe the highest caliber most credible link sources will become that much more important as a trust signal for engines.

The rewards from building artificial links will narrow – as the rewards from the social activates increase – that’s for sure.

Even at the moment – to compete in Google organic results, a top 2 or 3 is essential – and you need links from websites to do that.

I agree with Eric on this too:

I’d take the blog post link because it can continually provide traffic, new tweets, shares, etc., whereas a single tweet, even if by an authority, is fleeting and has a shorter half-life. Much more hit or miss.

If I get a choice between a 100 Tweets and a one link on a *real* website, today – **I would take the links from real websites or blog posts every time.** The safe answer is, **yes, you should be on social sites** – and you should be getting your site mentioned on these sites, regardless of exactly where the search engines are on social links at this point – as they will only get better at determining links to trust.

‘Great content’ probably has lots of links from many sources, and lots of tweets, too. I will tell you, though, I am **not** active on [Google+](#), [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) to help my search engine rankings *improve* – especially with my new sites. I may use Google+, Twitter or Facebook to get new content INDEXED (Bing certainly follows FB fan pages links and there is evidence Google Plus gets a page indexed) but I don’t expect *aged* content to rank that much *better* because of tweets- NOT at the moment, in Google, at least.

I much prefer to use social sites to reach *real* people, and I don’t expect Google to factor in any ranking signal they can’t control themselves. Would they base their algorithms around a 3rd party metric? It would surprise me if that were the case.

Matt Cutts Debunks Google Plus Votes as Important Ranking Factors

Do Google +1's Improve rankings in Google natural SERPs?

There's a lot of strange SEO news about at the moment. Mostly down to 'correlation' studies showing Google Plus votes correlation with high rankings. That observation may well be true – but **important ranking factor** it does not automatically make them, and that's what a lot of people on the fringes of SEO think when they see these studies. Google +1s are NOWHERE near as important as good link from a trusted site, in my experience.

So I chimed in on [Twitter](#)

“google plus votes are not the no1 ranking factor. You can tell, by *looking*“

....though shortly afterwards, somebody with a lot more clout than myself chimed in too....
Matt Cutts from Google:

Just trying to decide the politest way to debunk the idea that more Google +1s lead to higher Google web rankings.

Let's start with correlation != causation: <http://xkcd.com/552/> But it would probably be better to point to this 2011 post (also from SEOMoz/Moz) from two years ago in which a similar claim was made about Facebook shares: <http://moz.com/blog/does-google-use-facebook-shares-to-influ...>

From that blog post from two years ago: “One of the most interesting findings from our 2011 Ranking Factors analysis was the high correlation between Facebook shares and Google US search position.” This all came to a head at the SMX Advanced search conference in 2011 where Rand Fishkin presented his claims. I did a polite debunk of the idea that Google used Facebook shares in our web ranking at the conference, leading to this section in the 2011 blog post: “Rand pointed out that Google does have some access to Facebook data overall and set up a small-scale test to determine if Google would index content that was solely shared on Facebook.

To date, that page has not been indexed, despite having quite a few shares (64 according to the OpenGraph).” If you make compelling content, people will link to it, like it, share it on Facebook, +1 it, etc. But that doesn't mean that Google is using those signals in our ranking. Rather than chasing +1s of content, your time is much better spent making great content.

Do we always listen to Matt Cutts? Well, in between his PR, there are a lot of truths, too. I think so, anyway.... Do you listen to Moz? This SEO community has a history (some of which is seen in the above quote) of producing, at least, controversial studies.

Read how Matt Cutts debunks Google+ as ranking factors – see the full discussion here – <https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=6243451>

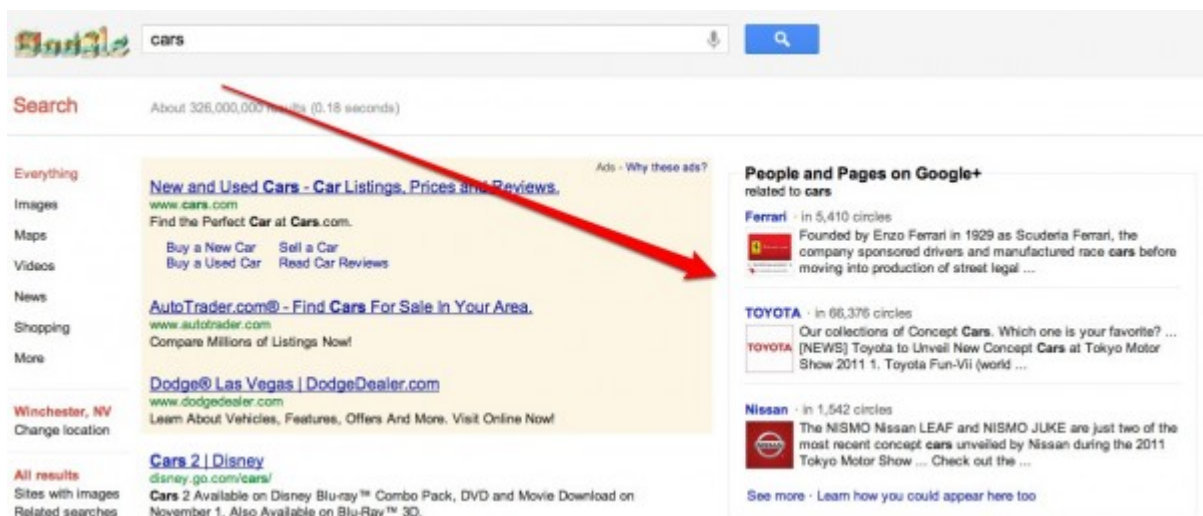
Ranking correlation does not = ranking factors.

I usually do without “correlation” analysis.

I wouldn't be spamming Google+ for votes. Not yet – and hey, **do you want to be spamming Google's social network and not think Google will punish this later like it has done with [low-quality links](#)?**

Note – a few people have said they will share with me some data on this that might prove otherwise. If I am blogging something different tomorrow, you'll know I have changed my mind. I will be swayed with empirical evidence.

Being INVOLVED IN GOOGLE PLUS IS important in 2016, though – and maybe even – a must-have marketing tool for your business:



Is there anyone out there who still wants to say that being on Google+ doesn't matter? Anyone? Because when being on Google+ means that you potentially can have your Google+ page leap to the top in those sidebar results, Google+ matters. It matters more than ever before. [Danny Sullivan – Search Engine Land](#)

Ten things I care more about than Google +1s or any social media share

1. **Google's classification system:** How Google classes your site – or rather YOUR INTENT, will have a major impact on your rankings. If your intent is to be an end-point of the traffic stop – to make money from Google's free traffic – and offer little in return – then Google is not your friend. If you are willing to play the long game Google's way (which isn't easy), there are still plenty of Opportunities, plenty of organic listings to be filled – even if they are under an amount of ads Google's top heavy algorithm would choke on.
2. **Domain Reputation:** I don't keep up with the terminology – but this is about how much Google trusts your site. This is the main reason as to why certain pages rank at the top of Google without (many) inbound links and sometimes have lots of social activity noise, and hence why we see crazy articles about social media having a bigger impact on rankings than links. Domain trust – or online business authority, I think – is based on factors I go into below. But getting, and keeping, domain trust, is all important now for real businesses that want to rank in natural listings using a quality content programme.
3. **Low quality links:** The low-quality links well is poisoned. Get out, now. Disavow them, remove them. Google killed low-quality link building techniques in most of the competitive niches I am in – probably yours, too. It's NOT just a matter of 'does this technique' work anymore. Low-quality links are not a defensible link strategy for most small businesses these days.
4. **Low-Quality SEO:** If Google has a reason to put you in the sin bin, they will. Usually – they will do this by algorithmic means or lately by MANUAL ACTIONS in Google Webmaster Tools. So if flagged for manual review, your site had better not scream "SEO!". You don't want to be caught milking Google's cash cow for yourself, whether that be pushing limits of technical SEO, or just plain old keyword stuffing. Not unless your business model allows for this.
5. **High-quality links.** Still, THE most important ranking factor. Link building just got HARDER, and MORE EXPENSIVE, just as Google wants it to. Low-quality link building is not defensible anymore and WILL get you into trouble, now that Google is policing its guidelines. The game now is to get high-quality links your competition CANNOT get (by hook, or by crook, you don't want to be caught doing it). This is not an easy task when Google's PR is making people even scared of linking out to reputable sites, for fear of appearing manipulative.
6. **Original, in-depth, passionate content:** If you side with the visitor, you will win, Google says. Ultimately – it's a moot point if you believe them or not. If you want free traffic from Google, you better get used to giving it free, high-quality content that will satisfy their visitors. Google wants to be the best search engine – it does want to satisfy certain users intent to find information. Google wants in-depth articles in organic listings – we even have new code for 'in-depth articles' too.

7. **The correct keywords** – this is genuinely the simplest thing you can do in SEO to get free traffic – proper keyword research. Sometimes – having A word on the page can be the difference between ranking no1 and not ranking at all, even with very relevant traffic. THIS is one way Google uses to share all that lovely free traffic about.
8. **Availability of your site** – if Google can't find your site for a few days – you will lose rankings that in some cases take some time to regain (smaller sites). If you block content from Google, you don't rank. It's a simple error I still see a lot of folk making – even theoretical physicists can foul of this**.
9. **Satisfaction score** – the amount of time people dwell on your site, and the 'success' rate of your visitor actions (e.g. did you help Google serve their customer? Did they stay on your site for a long time, and not go back to carry out the same search? And it's not just visitors from Google – if you want a page to rank – it better satisfy the curiosity of a Google web spam team reviewer, too. The author who created the controversy yesterday about Google Plus votes actually wrote a GREAT ARTICLE about user satisfaction (ignore the title, it is sensationalist and inaccurate, again). The article itself is a great read.
10. **The speed of your web pages**: I'd wager this was more important today than first introduced. Google even said that mobile sites rankings WILL suffer if not fast enough (and I have witnessed this I think). It's all about – user experience and satisfaction. If you make your website faster, everybody is probably happier.

Even as I write those – I can still think of other factors. In fact, I can say I don't factor Google Plus votes – or any other social share – in at all (at this time).

Google Plus, for my purposes, is a channel to get the word out – to get real links to a post (if I have my SEO hat on). If they are in play – it's far too lightweight a factor for me to have noticed above other things I expect to have an impact.

Are there more ranking signals?

TONS. The above are some of the main things you can do SOMETHING ABOUT without knowing the most technical aspects of SEO or falling foul of Google's guidelines.

Google is in constant flux, constant testing, constant UI change. Where you are in the world, and how often you've used Google from that location, and whether Google knows it's YOU that is searching, has a MASSIVE impact on the listings Google personalise for you.

I am not saying ignore Google+ – there ARE reported benefits in other areas – just not when it comes to ranking your content about other content using more traditional methods.

I just don't think Google are turning off links as a source of identifying quality any time soon, not when they are raking in the cash, and not when they are putting so much effort into punishing low-quality link building.

LinkBait With Information-Rich Content

Adding information rich content to your site is a great method of attracting natural links from forums and blogs, and the more in-depth the article, the more chance of it ranking high in Google for (especially) long tail variations of high traffic high-value keywords.

When you are at the top of the SERPs for particular keywords, particularly how to tutorials, you start picking up organic links from forums and blogs who see these articles as trusted articles because, well, they are at the top of Google!

When helping each other out, forum contributors often use Google to find an authority article and link to it to help newbies. Often they will usually just copy and paste the URL like so: http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/***** Not ideal.

Sometimes it's worth it go one step further and provide them with the BBcode and HTML versions of a nice anchor text rich link to start getting those keyword rich links to your site. Every now and again, change the anchor text to mix your back link profile a little. Sometimes you do pick up that natural looking keyword rich link.

Link to this page using BBcode

Check Out[URL=www.hobo-web.co.uk/blog-forum-baiting-get-anchor-text-rich-links/]
Blog & Forum Baiting - Get Anchor Text Rich Links From Forums & Blogs[/URL]
on the Hobo website.

Link to this page using HTML

Take a look at <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/link-building-strategy-for-beginners-a-month-of-free-tips/>
Blog & Forum Baiting - Get Anchor Text Rich Links on Hobo.

I have used this with varying degrees of success **in the past**. Might work for some of your very best articles, especially if desperate to get particular anchor text in your profile.

I wouldn't overdo this, though. I wouldn't over do anything these days.

It's kind of the same strategy as the now more traditional INFO-GRAPHIC.

Social media platforms have all but replaced the old forums – but some can STILL drive a lot of traffic, and some can also offer some SEO value. If you do nothing else to help people share your content – ADD SOCIAL MEDIA BUTTONS for the most appropriate social

media channels. Those links themselves might not carry much weight, but secondary links from such activity can.

A few years back [Lyndon Antcliff](#) was kind enough to share some insights of ‘Linkbait’ – or ‘Baiting Links’ using social media – and that advice is still sensible in 2016.

Social media marketing is more complicated than you think, in certain ways it’s simple, but you have to adapt tactics to suit the situation and that’s wear instinct is important.

Five things you need to think about before you post a piece of linkbait:

1. **Headline:** I would say the headline is the most important as if you don’t have this you have nothing. But a good headline can still get people to look at bad content.
2. **Formatting:** This is actually quite important, by formatting I mean the way the thing looks. There are specific looks which certain people associate with something they would like to link to, the aim is to emulate the “look”, which is different to different target groups.
3. **Images:** The web is multimedia, so use it. A great picture can do the work for you, a video even more so. If you can get an image in your linkbait do it, but not everyone has a good eye, check it with friends you know will tell you it’s crap if it is before you press submit.
4. **Audience:** Absolutely crucial, you have to know who the piece is intended for. You have to craft your idea to be able to fit snugly into the minds of your intended audience.
5. **Spelling:** I work very fast, so I make a lot of spelling mistakes, and I don’t usually bother with grammar. But diggers, for example are Nazis for grammar and spelling, so if you want anything dugg, it’s best to triple check.

If you are new to social media marketing, check out this: [How To Get Started in Social Media](#).

Do Hunt For Local Links

A quality link for me is an editorial link on a real site – a site that’s been around for years.

The site in question is well linked to itself, and doesn’t sell links – and is careful who they link to. These sites are kind of hard to get links from – but that’s the point...

Strategy? Well, you live somewhere. You live in a town or a city, in a region, in a wider region. Just type these three regions – one at a time – into Google, and Google will return a list of potential link partners. Hundreds of them. Live in the wilderness? Look at your nearest city.

Deployment? Offer a discount, or give away stuff (Google does this) for a mention on their site IF they don’t have any real reason to link to you.

Other sites will link to your site if you give them a reason to:

1. Your local Council – a lot of council sites have local business directories
2. Your local College or University – offer a student discount
3. Your local Chamber of Commerce – join, or offer a discount to members
4. Your local Newspaper – you should always be trying to get a mention in the local press – consider a competition
5. Local football club & supporters club – discount = mention on their site
6. Local sports clubs – there’s a ton of them in every town usually with crusty old sites – offer them a discount, donate or sponsor them for a mention on their site.
7. Local Business Directories – More often than not, somebody has built a local biz directory covering your local area. Get in there, as long as they are not a low-quality directory just made to spam Google.
8. Local faith groups or other local community groups – When it comes to business, I have no denomination. Discount anybody?
9. Local charities – a link you can probably buy! Sponsor a charity site for a mention – Google would be MEAN to penalise this sort of link buying on a small scale – and anyway, their attention is probably on bigger sites.
10. Local businesses – offer a discount to staff

These links aren’t all easy to get and will take time to get (if your comparing them to how fast you can buy or get links on sites these days that offer no value to your site in the long term). See what I did there.

So while your competitors are off buying links on crap third world domain hosting companies, submitting to 100,000 useless search engines, submitting to 100 useless directories, spamming dofollow blogs and forums or hiring a social media consultant to get 10,000 non-paying visitors from Stumbleupon or Facebook etc. etc. YOU are picking up nice little, quality long-term links on trusted sites that probably are not being abused, and will fly right under any Google manipulation-radar, and all will help to build your domain authority

and trust in Google results pages. And all these kind of links above can be mixed and match to a national campaign if you know how to scale your efforts in a sensible manner.

These are good links for beginners to chase down – but remember – the best links will need some GREAT CONTENT to point to.

When hunting for links – I always remember some advice [Jim Boykin](#) gave me:

Well, if I were to see a link somewhere, and were ask to value it's SEO's worth, then I'd look at the page where the link is located on, and compare it where that link links to. From the "ad" page, I'd see what percent of the internal links link to that page, then I'd check the internal link text used to link to that page, then I'd check external links to that page, and link text used from other sites that link to that page, then I'd look at the title tag of the page, then I'd look at the content of that page, I could peek at the age of the url, edu's, edu's to page, other links on that page (co-citation), related pages of that page, and a few other things too....there's tons you can analyze, and all have a certain value. In the end it comes to "you get what you can get", it's not always the "perfect link".

Beware Building Low-Quality Links



When you build a wall, you do it bit by bit, with the same kind of identical bricks until you have a lot of bricks that all look the same... presto, you have a wall. That's building. You can't *build* links that way in 2016 and EXPECT to win the ranking wars in Google as Google is actively fighting you.

Your 'bricks' kind of need to be different, 'brick' to 'brick', to avoid annoying Google or a competitor. There's a thought out there. Get 200 or 300 or 400 links and you'll rank. So it's natural that you think I'll buy some links from *that* mob (and I mean mob) for \$200, and I'm sorted.

You're not. Those cheap link building efforts are s*&t (sorry, no other word to describe it). Depending on how good the search engine optimisation company is of course – there's different varying colours of s*&t but generally speaking, you stand in it when you open your email, and it says:

We noticed you don't rank for any of your keywords. We are an expert link building company.....

They'll come from spammy blog and forum comments that might hurt your brand or web hosting companies with an obvious unnatural paid link profile.

Even if they are decent at their job – a competitor will just report you for buying links if you do it too much. It will stick out like a sore thumb you're buying links, and that's against Google TOS. Stop thinking about building links. Start thinking of creating and promoting useful content. Beware buying any 'affordable' linkbuilding service promising you guaranteed top rankings, even if they do have apparently great reviews on forums or blogs.

There's no automated link building program that will not get you penalised, eventually, in my experience, but maybe I wasn't doing it properly.

Conversely, I'd give advanced link building courses a miss too, and just focus on making your site a better landing page. Free link building software will probably have lots of free software you don't know you're installing on your PC.

Earning Media Links

I love picking up media links. The best way to get them is to be an authority on a subject, and that usually means WRITING posts that illustrate some expertise on the matter. A PR agency is a great way of getting you these types of links – they have the contacts. Legitimate PR is one of the most valuable assets in your link earning strategy.

I also like trying to get (or give) testimonials for links although I don't over do it – and I would only do it for products I like.

The Perfect Link Request Email

First, there's probably no PERFECT link request email. :) but here's how I do it (for the Hobo site, every so often).

- I don't send that many out – only one in the last year – which I got.
- I keep the email short and to the point
- I use a title like “FAO Organisation Website Name” Website
- I never automate them – each one is crafted personally and (much like the blog) in a laid back manner.
- I CORRECTLY IDENTIFY the exact PAGE I want a link on (after identifying it's a good page (and yes, Pagerank comes into it regardless of what others say but I also look to see if that page ranks high, gets traffic and is itself internally (at least) well linked to.
- I never ask for links on their home page.
- I never ask them to link to my home page.
- I also correctly IDENTIFY if they have a habit of linking out to relevant articles.
- I always provide them with the URL I desire them to link to
- I ALWAYS have a piece of content that's of value and WORTH linking to – after all, I wouldn't link to pap.
- I NEVER specify anchor text that should be used.
- I NEVER even mention reciprocal links
- I only contact them once (ok, maybe twice over the course of a year, as it turned out)
- I am honest as to who I am when doing it for myself

Most importantly – I am honest about why I want a link.

I don't tell them it will help them, I tell them (usually) it's more up to date information than they currently link to and it will help us and might be useful to their readers. And it is. I don't tell them it will help their rankings, or that I was “browsing the web and came across their site”.

I'm not exactly sure what above is the ‘killer’, but this method works more often than not. Lastly, if I spot something amiss on their site, I'll point it out in a friendly manner, and tell

them to contact me if they need any assistance in the subject of what I do – SEO. Not exactly rocket science is it.

In Summary

Don't let anyone tell you 'link building is dead' – because that's not true.

You SHOULD STILL be thinking of WHERE your NEXT BEST LINK should be coming from – it's incredibly important if you have no links. You should avoid unnatural links.

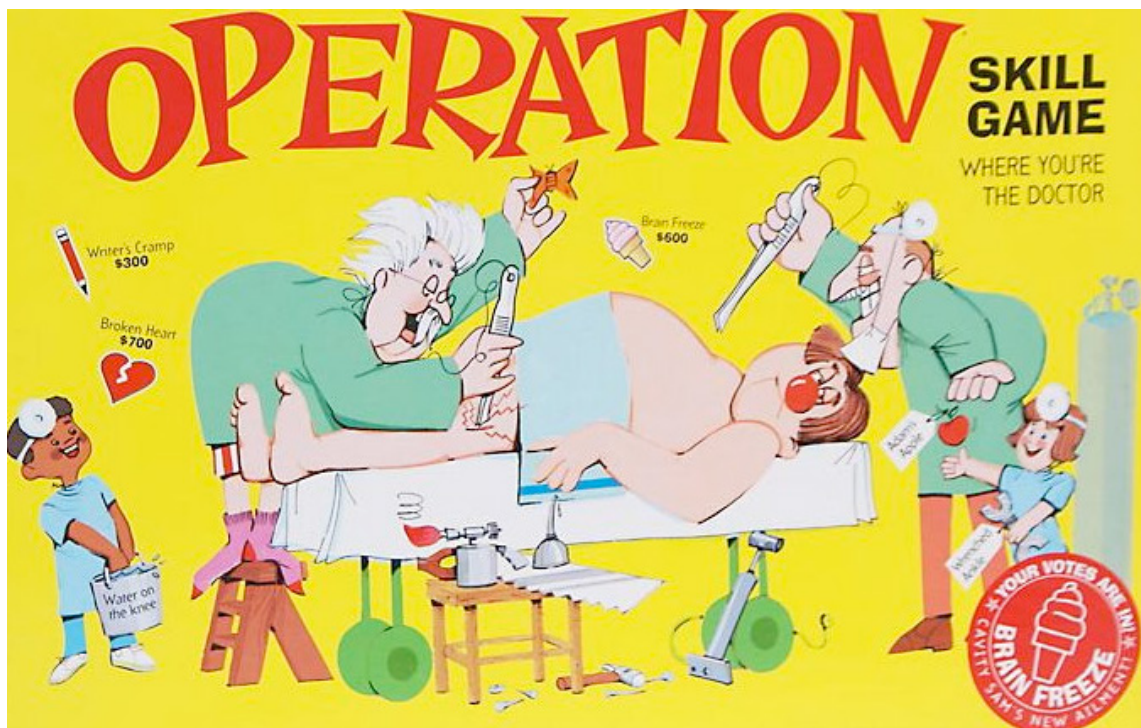
I'd focus on building better in-depth content than your competitors have, and spend time making friends online who might throw you a bone and share your content, so you have a chance of picking up those EDITORIAL LINKS you need to rank in Google with.

I would certainly avoid like the plague link building packages with promises of guaranteed ranking – even with 'no footprint' claims – even those you spot on Adwords. Those are VERY rarely going to be expert black hats pimping those services – and often – the end-result is your site will 'burn'. If you don't want to jump through all these hoops and avoid penalties – get some aged domains together for your business and hire a good black hat – **it's redirect, burn and churn time – but look out – Google is out to burn you :)**

If (for educational purposes, of course) you want to learn more about other aspects of marketing in Google with link strategies that I have deliberately steered clear of, I'd consider running it by [Paul Madden](#), [Rishi Lankini](#) or [Irish Wonder](#), – three smart influential people I know with their ear to the ground on such matters.

I hope you found these linkbuilding tips useful enough to comment or share :)

Operation: Finding & Removing Unnatural Links



This blog is mostly about SEO for small businesses and [beginners to SEO](#). Although I have touched on other areas that interest me and not specifically SEO, I don't usually blog about all the [algorithm changes](#) Google pushes out as they are widely discussed, sometimes hastily, on plenty of other blogs.

A lot of these changes in Google are aimed at industrial-strength-manipulation of either Google's *reputation* and *relevance* reward systems, which it relies on to create SERPs (*search engine results pages*) – and lots of smaller businesses won't have come across them.

However, if you *have* been competing in your niche for positions using backlinks – chances are, you will be affected.

Google is indeed making a lot of noise about unnatural links so you cannot simply *ignore* them. They've chosen NOT to ignore your links anymore if they detect an INTENT to rank for specific keywords using lower quality means – or **link schemes**, in other words.

My primary interest is SEO for real business websites, and this post is about something that's probably going to hit a lot of smaller businesses that've been promoting their site using low-quality SEO services – resulting in **unnatural links**, which in turn can lead to an increased risk of 'negative seo'.

What are unnatural links?

Well, if you've been actively promoting your website, sit back for a moment and think about all the links you managed to generate to your site because you DID NOT come from a position of actually building a rich, informative site – yes – all those links.

If you paid a link building company to get you links, yes, those links (probably).






If you are using cheap submission services that are not a scam, yes those links. Those tactics to get easy-to-get links you got that were linking to your competitors' websites?

Yes, those links.

In short – if you are using unnatural links to get top positions and don't deserve them Google will nuke your site when it detects them.

Google knows which keywords to penalise you for to destroy your ability to attract useful organic visits.

Content Keywords

Keyword	Significance
1. google (5 variants)	
2. seo (3 variants)	
3. hobo (3 variants)	
4. blog (7 variants)	
5. says (2 variants)	

Sometimes this happens on a keyword level, sometimes page-by-page – sometimes site-by-site!

It's NOT ALL manipulative links Google is penalising, either. Many manipulative links still work – but Google is good at detecting a lot of them, in time.

Sensible opportunistic links still pass a manual review, it appears. Paid links and lots of ‘spam’ still dominate lots of competitive niches. White hat SEO has little, if any chance, of ranking in these SERPs.

The important thing to realise is there is a certain amount of risk now associated with backlinks that point to any site and any page.

How do I find out if there are ‘unnatural’ links pointing to a website?

Google is telling a lot of people by email if you have subscribed through *Google Webmaster Tools* (now called Google Search Console). If you have unnatural links you need to worry about – the best place I think to detect any issues is rather obviously Google Analytics. If you have been found out, traffic will have plummeted.

There is an argument that Google is forcing website owners into using Google Webmaster Tools to get, what is, after all, limited information, but still, is the kind of data that you cannot get anywhere else.

What happens to my site if Google detects unnatural links?

Sometimes you’ll get an email from Google:

Dear site owner or webmaster of <http://www.example.com/>, We’ve detected that some of your site’s pages may be using techniques that are outside Google’s Webmaster Guidelines. Specifically, look for possibly artificial or unnatural links pointing to your site that could be intended to manipulate PageRank. Examples of unnatural linking could include buying links to pass PageRank or participating in link schemes. We encourage you to make changes to your site so that it meets our quality guidelines. Once you’ve made these changes, please submit your site for reconsideration in Google’s search results. If you find unnatural links to your site that you are unable to control or remove, please provide the details in your reconsideration request. If you have any questions about how to resolve this issue, please see our Webmaster Help Forum for support.

Sincerely,

Google Search Quality Team

Google is moving in various directions:

In less severe cases, we sometimes target specific spammy or artificial links created as part of a link scheme and distrust only those links, rather than taking action on a site’s overall

ranking. The new messages make it clear that we are taking “targeted action on the unnatural links instead of your site as a whole.”

Other times the indicators might be more subtle.

- You might not rank at all in Google for something you used to rank for very well for.
- Your traffic might reduce month by month.
- You might disappear overnight for valuable keywords associated with your content.
- You might disappear for one keyword phrase.
- You might be reviewed, manually.

If you are, indeed, penalised, you’re going to have clean your links up if you want to restore your ‘reputation’ in Google. Penalties can last from 30 days to, well, forever (if no clean-up is undertaken).

Google appears to crawl a site slower under a penalty. Google caches changes to your pages a lot less frequently, too, it seems, and fresh content seems to struggle a bit more to get into Google’s index. In some cases – you might not rank for your brand name.

In the very worst cases – your site and all its pages can be removed from Google. It can be ‘*de-indexed*’.

When you get a penalty revoked, things start to get back to normal within a month or two.

What can I do about unnatural links?

If you are a small business – you probably don’t want to start again with a new domain. Do you want to use [301 redirects](#) to postpone a Google slap? That option works for, at least, a while.

The best choice, however, is to clean toxic links up.

First, you’ll need to [download your backlinks from Google](#).

Download links to your site

1. On the Webmaster Tools home page, click the site you want.
2. On the Dashboard, click **Traffic**, and then click **Links to Your Site**.
3. Under **Who links the most**, click **More**.
4. Click **Download more sample links**. If you click **Download latest links**, you’ll see dates as well.

Note: When looking at the links to your site in Webmaster Tools, you may want to verify both the [www and the non-www version of your domain](#) in your Webmaster Tools account. To Google, these are entirely different sites. Take a look at the data for both sites. [More information](#)

Which unnatural links am I supposed to worry about?

PAID LINKS are the REAL toxic links Google is looking to penalise you for, and these leave a nasty footprint e.g.:

- a high % of backlinks on low-quality sites
- a high % of backlinks on duplicate articles
- a high % of links with duplicate anchor text
- links from irrelevant sites or articles
- footer links on unrelated sites

You are looking for the non-editorial links or links from very low-quality websites that link to your site.

Google will penalise you for these links if a clear intent to manipulate results is evident.

Most, if not all, low-quality links are (probably) easy for Google to detect algorithmically. Most low-quality links Google will ignore, in time.

Do I need to remove bad links?

We know that perhaps not every link can be cleaned up, but in order to deem a reconsideration request as successful, we need to see a substantial good-faith effort to remove the links, and this effort should result in a decrease in the number of bad links that we see.
GOOGLE

You are going to have to try and remove the worst offenders, especially if you receive a manual action notice.

How To Remove Unnatural Links

I've had success using simple methods and widely available tools.

1. [Removing pages that are the target of unnatural links](#)
2. Google Webmaster Tools
3. Excel
4. Pagerank

I have since built my in-house toolset to manage my backlinks.

Do I need to audit my backlinks?

Most definitely.

Google is *fully* expected to make a lot of noise about unnatural links in 2016, and that always involves website rankings impacted in some way.

Whether or not you use the Disavow Tool in Google, you should be looking at your backlink profile and see what various links are doing to your rankings. You should, at least, know who links to you, so you can calculate the risk to your organic traffic that is attached to those links.

A simple method I used when this first became a problem a few years ago, was:

- Download your links from Google Webmaster Tools, pop them into Excel. I will presume you have [SEO Tools for Excel](#) (I also have [URL Tools](#) installed).
- Get the root domain of each link (I've used URL Tools for this for a while), and check its [toolbar Pagerank](#) with SEO Tools for Excel.
- Most of those links with zero -1 PageRank on the domain are worth looking at. Do the same for the actual page your links are on (on domains with PR). Similarly, if you have lots of links and all your links are on pages with -1. That's probably not a good indicator of reputation – even though PR is INCREDIBLY out of date, in 2016.
- If you have a LOT of links (tens of thousands) filtering, in Excel, for unique domains can speed up this process.
- I normally get the PAGE TITLE of the linking page too (using SEO Tools for Excel), so I can easily detect duplicate articles on lower quality sites, and sites not yet affected by a Pagerank drop.

Of course, there are some false positives.

Pagerank can be glitchy, or flat-out misleading. So a human eye is always needed to reduce these false positives.

Using this method I've successfully identified lower quality sites relatively quickly. To be fair, I know a crap link.

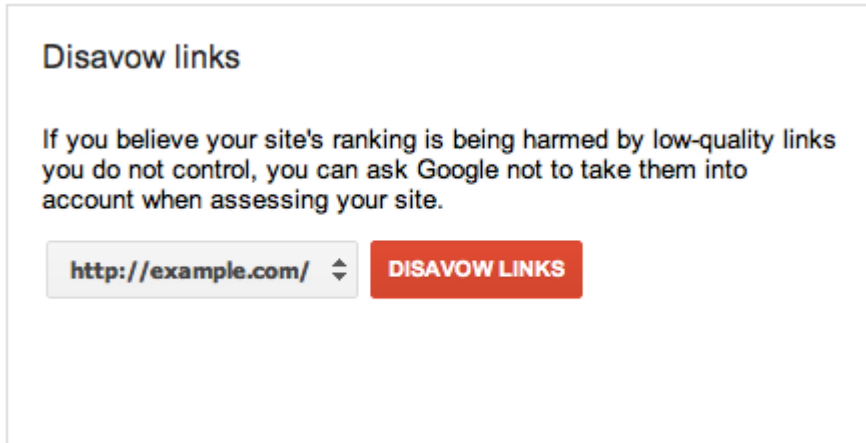
Ultimately, if you have a lot of links, you can never be too sure which particular links are 'toxic'.

It may very well be the volume of a particular tactic used that gets your site in trouble – and not one individual link.

If you have a load of low-quality directory submissions in your backlink profile or have taken part in low-quality article marketing recently, the next Google update might just be targeted at you (if it hasn't already had an impact on your rankings).

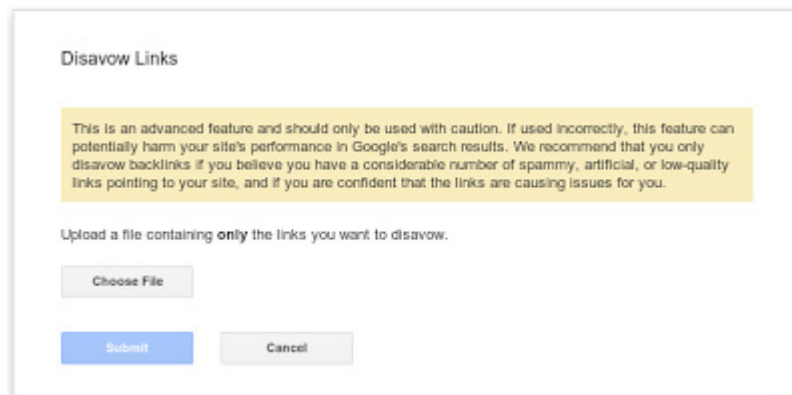
Once you've examined your links and identified low-quality links, you can then submit a list of links to Google in a simple text file called **disavow.txt**.

What is the Disavow Tool?



The screenshot shows the 'Disavow links' section of the Google Search Console interface. It includes a heading 'Disavow links', a descriptive paragraph about disavowing low-quality links, a text input field containing 'http://example.com/' with a dropdown arrow, and a red button labeled 'DISAVOW LINKS'.

A tool provided by Google in *Google Webmaster Tools* (now *Search Console*). You can specify which domains you want to disavow the links from (you can also specify individual pages). Generally speaking, if disavowing a link, you are better off disavowing the entire domain (if it is a spammy domain).



This screenshot shows a more detailed view of the 'Disavow Links' tool. It features a warning box stating: 'This is an advanced feature and should only be used with caution. If used incorrectly, this feature can potentially harm your site's performance in Google's search results. We recommend that you only disavow backlinks if you believe you have a considerable number of spammy, artificial, or low-quality links pointing to your site, and if you are confident that the links are causing issues for you.' Below the warning, there is a prompt: 'Upload a file containing **only** the links you want to disavow.' This is followed by a 'Choose File' button, a 'Submit' button, and a 'Cancel' button.

The disavow.txt is just a simple text file with the following list of domains e.g.:

- domain:google.com
- domain:plus.google.com

The way it appears to work is you tell Google which links to ignore when they are calculating whether or not to rank you high or boot your rankings in the balls.

If you've done as much work as you can to remove spammy or low-quality links from the web, and are unable to make further progress on getting the links taken down, you can disavow the remaining links. In other words, you can ask Google not to take certain links into account when assessing your site. GOOGLE

Google has said that they will treat links found in your disavow file as [nofollow links](#).

Should I use the Disavow Tool?

This is an advanced feature and should only be used with caution. If used incorrectly, this feature can potentially harm your site's performance in Google's search results. We recommend that you disavow backlinks only if you believe you have a considerable number of spammy, artificial, or low-quality links pointing to your site, and if you are confident that the links are causing issues for you. In most cases, Google can assess which links to trust without additional guidance, so most normal or typical sites will not need to use this tool.

Some might recommend removing links instead of just using this disavow tool from Google. Lots of people have different angles.

I have used BOTH methods to recover sites from manual actions and algorithmic penalties.

If you have a manual penalty, you *will* probably also need to get some of these links physically removed or at least *try* and get them removed. Yes, that means emailing webmasters and keeping a record of that endeavour.

If you get a manual penalty, have lots of links and removing the low-quality links is going to be a hard task – you **WILL** need to employ the disavow file in 2016.

I also proactively disavow links it on sites that are obviously algorithmically penalised for particular keywords or on links I expect will cause a problem later on. One would expect penalties are based on algorithmic detection on some level for some sites.

If you've ever attempted to manipulate Google, now's the time to at least quantify the risk attached with those links.

I recommend you go that one step further and disavow all low-quality links pointing at your site, as:

- Google is better at identifying your low-quality links.
- Google already knows about your crap links.
- Google is very definitely ignoring most of your links.
- Google has probably already has penalised you in areas and you probably are not aware of it. I've helped a few sites that got the unnatural links message that were clearly algorithmically slapped a year before and never noticed it until it started to hurt.
- Some competitors will 'negative seo' your website (I go into this below).

Using the disavow tool

Upload a list of links to disavow:

- Go to the [disavow links tool page](#).
- Select your website.
- Click **Disavow links**.
- Click **Choose file**.

Google says:

It may take some time for Google to process the information you've uploaded. In particular, this information will be incorporated into our index as we recrawl the web and reprocess the pages that we see, which can take a number of weeks.

... and they are telling it like it is.

This process is *designed*, by Google, to take TIME to fix.

Will your rankings come back?

This depends on what, if any, quality signals are left in your backlink profile and what's happening in your niche. If you have decent links, individual rankings can come back, that is for sure.

I've yet to see a site hit by a link penalty where traffic levels have returned to previous best positions. Sometimes there's just better, more information rich pages out there these days for Google to rank above your page.

But YES, I've seen rankings come back after a manual penalty. Sometimes better than they were before.

I've yet to see site-wide traffic levels return to normal in most cases, without investment in many areas.

Recovery from a links based penalty is a two-step process; a clean-up process and a growth process and this growth process involves investment in higher quality web marketing.

Are you penalised, or is Google just ignoring your links?

Here is something to think about, which may help you direct your efforts:

If you start with nothing, get top rankings in 3 months, and then end up with nothing.

Are you penalised? Really?

Or is Google just ignoring your links?

If the 'penalty' is an algorithmic shift, then by the very nature of it, getting good links (links Google has no reason to believe are suspect) to your website should tip the balance in your favour again.

It is worth noting that in some business cases, and with some business models – starting again on an entirely new domain might just be a better option, after a link penalty – especially if you think you need these type of link schemes to compete in the first place.

Link Schemes

Google is getting serious with what it calls link schemes (ways to get easy links):

What Google says about link schemes:

Your site's ranking in Google search results is partly based on analysis of those sites that link to you. The quantity, quality, and relevance of links influences your ranking. The sites that link to you can provide context about the subject matter of your site, and can indicate its quality and popularity. Any links intended to manipulate a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme. This includes any behavior that manipulates links to your site, or outgoing links from your site. Manipulating these links may affect the quality of our search results, and as such is a violation of Google's [Webmaster Guidelines](#). The following are examples of link schemes, which can negatively impact a site's ranking in search results:

Some examples include:

- Buying or selling links that pass PageRank. This includes exchanging money for links, or posts that contain links; exchanging goods or services for links; or sending someone a "free" product in exchange for them writing about it and including a link
- Excessive link exchanging ("Link to me and I'll link to you")
- Linking to web spammers or unrelated sites with the intent to manipulate PageRank
- Building partner pages exclusively for the sake of cross-linking
- Using automated programs or services to create links to your site
- Text advertisements that pass PageRank
- Links that are inserted into articles with little coherence
- Low-quality directory or bookmark site links
- Links embedded in widgets that are distributed across various sites
- Widely distributed links in the footers of various sites
- Forum comments with optimised links in the post or signature

What Google says about building natural links:

The best way to get other sites to create relevant links to yours is to create unique, relevant content that can quickly gain popularity in the Internet community. The more useful content you have, the greater the chances someone else will find that content valuable to their readers and link to it. Before making any single decision, you should ask yourself: Is this going to be beneficial for my page's visitors? It is not only the number of links you have pointing to your site that matters, but also the quality and relevance of those links. Creating good content pays off: Links are usually editorial votes given by choice, and the buzzing blogger community can be an excellent place to generate interest.

Ironically [Google has ignored their own rules](#) on many occasions with, apparently, little long term consequence.

Big brands can be hit, too, with these link penalties, but these type of sites certainly DO seem to be able to get away with a lot more than your average webmaster, and so these problems often are often short-lived, especially if they make the news.

Big brands and healthier websites, in general, have 'natural links' pointing to them, from reputable websites, so this often serves to protect big sites from major penalties or *negative seo* attacks.

So how do we get 'natural' links?

The simple answer is we're all going to have to think harder and work harder to get [links from real sites](#) to real, user-friendly content. I think it's fair to say you need to avoid links from websites designed to give you a link, especially for cash, or reciprocal links.

I'd certainly:

- stay away from just about all ARTICLE SITES
- most DIRECTORIES and
- most BLOG NETWORKS
- IGNORE LOW-QUALITY SPAM EMAILS offering you links (or cheap SEO services).
- Be wary of ADVERTORIALS
- avoid LOW-QUALITY GUEST POSTS and
- LOW QUALITY, OFF TOPIC SITE-WIDE LINKS.

NOTE – In my experience you do not need to remove every instance of a site-wide link. NOT if they are on topic, and editorially given.

Will my competitor be penalised for unnatural links?

Sometimes they will, sometimes they won't.

You can always tell Google about them, or out them in Google forums. If you have the energy to be bothered with that – perhaps focusing some of this on making your site a better user experience for Google's users is a more productive use of your time.

Eventually, Google will catch up with a competitor's low-quality links, unless they know what they are doing, of course.

Why doesn't Google just ignore bad links?

Where would the fun in that be? Google wants our focus on low-quality backlinks for now, and so, it is.

It's in Google's interest to keep us guessing at every stage of SEO.

Is linkbuilding Dead?

No – this is what SEO (I use the term collectively) is all about. If Google didn't do this every now and again, 'search engine optimisation' wouldn't exist. Opportunity will exist as long as Google doesn't do away with organic listings because they can't be trusted or produce a 'frustrating' user experience in themselves. Not until Google convince people of that.

One thing's been constant in Google since day 2. SPAM, or Sites Positioned Above Me.

I think it's safe to say there will always be spam, some of your competition will always use methods that break the rules and beat you down. There will be ways to get around Google – at least, there always has.

Obviously manipulative backlinks aren't going to increase in quality over time, and if Google is true to its word, it might just slap us for [them](#).

Summary

Google is serious about messing with the longevity and confidence in SEO. If you get a manual penalty, you'll probably have to remove links and use the disavow tool – which is a tremendous drain on resources and time.

- Audit your back links if nothing else.
- Consider using the disavow tool to tackle obvious algorithmic penalties if traffic is taking a nosedive, or a site you know will take a hit in the next Google Penguin update.

There are arguments against this, mind you, but **low-quality unnatural links are certainly going to have to be addressed** for sites with little [online business authority](#) themselves – and probably even more so for sites that exist to profit from natural SEO traffic.

You are going to hear a lot about '*content marketing*' going into the near future.

You still **need to be building links**, but **avoid the low-quality stuff** and avoid the kind of networks on Google's radar.

Any industrial method of link-building is eventually going to get Google's attention.

For a refresher – you can also see things Google tells you to avoid.

Related links

- [Using the Disavow Tool](#)
- [Google Disavow Tool](#)
- [Announcement From Google about the tool](#)
- [Link Schemes](#)
- [Site not doing well in Google?](#)
- [Notice about unnatural links](#)

If you are having problems with unnatural links, or experienced a gradual, or cataclysmic fall in traffic from Google, and want professional help to remove them, you can [contact us here](#).

Keep Up-To-Date

For industry news about seo in general, I follow [Search Engine Land](#) and [Search Engine Roundtable](#). For search engine patent analysis, I recommend [Bill Slawski](#).

Reliable Google Penalty Recovery Services

We have a very good track record of lifting penalties, or manual actions, as they are called. We do NOT have a special relationship with Google or anything (NO SEO company does), but Google (in our recent experience) is being fair-handed when you make a concerted effort to promote your website in their listings by their guidelines.

We get successful results because we **STICK AT IT** – and **work with your business UNTIL the penalty is lifted, and for a fixed cost**, based on the number of domains (websites) pointing at your site.

Every website situation is different, but the good news is your business **CAN** recover from such a Google penalty. It **CAN** return to previous ranking positions.

Rankings and traffic **CAN** even improve after a penalty if you are willing to promote your website in a way more likely to build real trust and reputation signals to your website.

We can often get a penalty lifted relatively **FAST**, and using no tricks – contact us today if you need a professional, manual review of your unnatural links, and help with identifying and removing them, for a successful Google reconsideration request.

Verdict: A ‘Prolonged, Sustained’ Sin Bin For Google Manual Actions On Artificial Links

The **penalty box** (sometimes called the **sin bin**, **bad box**, or simply **bin**) is the area in ice hockey, rugby league, rugby union and some other sports where a player sits to serve the time of a given penalty, for an offense not severe enough to merit outright expulsion from the contest.

If...

1. Google identifies you have unnatural links pointing at your site, and
2. a history of ‘web spam’ activity Google is confident about, and
3. you get a manual actions message in Google Webmaster Tools
4. or your traffic or rankings tank over night

...you can probably consider your site “sin-binned” – penalised – until you sort the unnatural links out.

I see a lot of people complaining this doesn’t work and that doesn’t work to lift these penalties – manual or algorithmic – [Google isn’t fair!!! Google is telling lies!!!] – they seem to miss the point.

Punishment

Punishment is the point. Google wants you to feel the pain. Google wants you to lose time. It wants you to refocus your efforts away from investment in low-quality link building services. Google wants you removing these links from the web – which for some involves a lot of emails to webmasters of sites you’ve dropped links on, numerous times. Google wants to see you’re rehabilitated. That you’ve learned the error of your ways. From this point on – it’s all quality stuff. **They want to stop you buying links.**

Whether or not you agree with it, that’s how it is – or at least, the message Google is ramming down our throats.

Using the disavow tool as a last choice

The disavow tool is presented as the last choice. I find this rather contrary, as the disavow file would surely be a MUCH faster way of showing “good faith” in dissociating a site from artificial links.

It’s where I start.

*“You know, whether you’re tracking things in a spreadsheet. Or you’re just doing a good job of monitoring. How many sites you’ve asked to take things down. Essentially we just wanna know you’ve done a **prolonged, sustained effort** to try to clean things up as much as possible. So the mental model we want you to have is this. We’d like to see as much of the link spam to go away. As much as possible. And so that’s your first goal. To try to get as much down. And then we need to know that ideally, we’re not gonna see this sort of link spam in the future. And so that’s where the documentation comes into effect”. MATT CUTTS*

Community Service

Google even wants us cleaning up the links that were made in your name.

Google doesn’t want folk seeing how low-quality links manipulate Google results. If you’ve looked at link spam, or been involved with it, you’ll know that linkspam makes Google look stupid, and render proclamations about good content ranking above spam ‘not true’, at least, in many instances. If you get a penalty for unnatural links – you just bought some community service cleaning up the neighbourhood. Don’t like that? Tough sh*t.

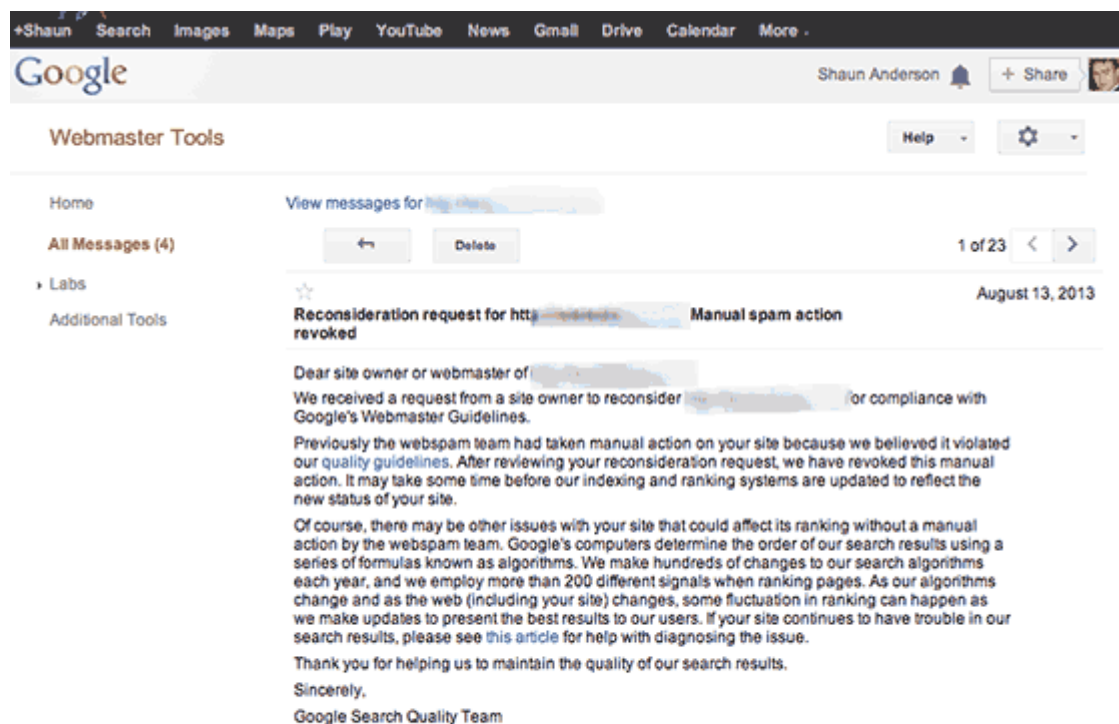
Will your rankings recover after you remove a penalty?

While I answer this in my [other post](#) (and the answer is – *depends on what quality you have left after your link clean up*), I think it is a mute point.

In many cases, if you have a manual action against your site, you are not going anywhere on your main keywords until you do something about it. If you ignore the warning or try to play around it, other rankings start to deteriorate, given time. Unnatural links are, I think I can say, the kind of links that often made sites rank at the top of Google organic listings, from 1998 to, well, now. It is and was *very hard* to compete with unnatural links, without employing them.

Clearly Google is telling us the **fastest way to get out of this penalty box is to remove the artificial links pointing at your site** and disavow the rest. A scary prospect for everyone I talk to – these are the links that got no1 rankings. That is true as far as I can tell.

I am talking from experience (this is all I can do):



I've seen quite a few of those now.....

If I cared about the site in question from a longevity point of view, **I would dump low-quality unnatural backlinks now** – and stay away from building them in the future. Penalties get harsher for repeat offenders, and Google is getting more and more aggressive, and faster, in dealing with them. PAID LINKS are particularly problematic if Google finds them – and I’ve seen enough of them recently in site cleanups (from supposed experience paid link brokers), to say the VAST majority of [paid links](#) are clearly paid links lol. Oops.

I wonder what happens next year, despite repeated warnings, some sites still engage in low-quality SEO tactics. What happens when low-quality SEO activity “merit(s) outright expulsion from the contest” for a big brand for a prolonged period.

Maybe Google won’t go this far with a big brand (they can defend themselves) – but it will CERTAINLY do it to your site.

Whatever – cleaning up your backlinks just became a priority!

“A Level Playing Field” – Matt Cutts



What about the people optimizing really hard and doing a lot of SEO. We don't normally pre-announce changes but there is something we are working in the last few months and hope to release it in the next months or few weeks. We are trying to level the playing field a bit. All those people doing, for lack of a better word, over optimization or overly SEO – versus those making great content and great site. We are trying to make GoogleBot smarter, make our relevance better, and we are also looking for those who abuse it, like too many keywords on a page, or exchange way too many links or go well beyond what you normally expect. We have several engineers on my team working on this right now. MATT CUTTS – GOOGLE ([SER](#)).

If I have my SEO hat on I think **SEO (or rather, link building) levels the playing field**. I also often think Google is throwing us a Kansas City shuffle. We can all see CLEARLY the way Google has set up a strategy for IT to win online, which lets big brands dominate organic listings in many (if not all) niches.

But I recognise, if Google didn't change, our particular SEO industry would not exist. If Google didn't change, industrial SEO players would leave no room for most of the industry – me and you included.

If I put my 'start-up' hat on, it's a different scenario.

For instance, say a website launches with the real quality content. It could, should, rank for some nice terms, but it doesn't. It's below a myriad of substandard 'just good enough' content. It is below sites built upon a mountain of paid article marketing activity, directories and paid links, built up over time that even editorial links can't help you topple. And this, *just* because you can do it, because of the way Google, and most search engines, work by counting backlinks as votes.

Is it fair to rank high in Google natural listings (by that I mean under the fold, below Google and Wikipedia and big media sites, of course) using this manipulation – just because you can? In a perfect world, which we don't live in, it certainly sounds a fairer system.

Whatever you and I think (which is, usually, based on how you make a living) – Google says 'no' to low-quality SEO, and Google calls the shots in SEOLand.

Google Is Making The Organic Listings It Wants

Google has always said no, but now it's CLEARLY saying no, and backing this up with some aggressive punishment. It doesn't matter if you think Google should be better at attributing quality. It's far easier for Google to take this route.

It's easier to penalise low-quality manipulation – the type A LOT of sites had to use to compete for rankings.

This, of course, will all have the effect of lifting corporations and big trusted brands into the top of the natural SERPs, and any critic of Google will tell you that. I don't know – but I am a bit tired of the 'I hate Google rhetoric coming out of the SEO industry. For sure, A LOT of this criticism is warranted, but it's cool to rebel. Cool – but usually a pointless waste of time. I prefer to spend my time on stuff that that see me through these changes, and moaning about Google just doesn't do it for me anymore: too much energy for too little reward.

A Defensible Link Strategy

Google now has an army of unpaid website reviewers working for it. A link that can't pass a manual review, or is on a site that wouldn't exist if Google didn't count links – is not defensible anymore. Well, lots of them are not. It's easier, and cheaper, to get a competitor (who is outright breaking the rules) penalised than beat them at their own game – though this, like everything to do with Google, takes time.

When grey-hat becomes black-hat, you're better off leaving that stuff to the people who know what they are doing, and what to expect from it. It's too easy for your activity to be reported to Google these days – it doesn't matter if it 'works' to change your rankings if you don't have a long-term plan to deal with the fallout.

Google is siding with the "user" in a classic move where Google can't lose. A sensible move for SEO is to do the same, whether you like it or not.

Google guidelines are (effectively) laws for ranking in Google now, where once, they were just a list of things that you could use to rank in Google. Google is more than happy to crack down on them now. Since 1998, it wanted us to live under rules that were not policed properly and so, by definition, unfair. These rules are so 'unfair, even Google can't play by them. But Google is certainly policing them more effectively today.

Nonetheless, the message is slightly different to SEO today than it was back then, before industrial SEO.

Google WANTS its SERPs a certain way, rightly or wrongly, and now ADMITS freely its algorithms are not always up to the job – it's happy to manually edit listings and manually penalise sites, to get the SERPs it WANTS.

It's all part of a great move on Google's part, for Google's long-term benefit.

The message is clear – **stay away from low-quality link building tactics.**

Most of these shortcuts are EASILY DETECTABLE and will only hurt you. Link building isn't dead, it can't die, only change.

Low-quality link building IS dead.

Google IS 'levelling' the playing field and it's probably best for small businesses to stay out of Google's way at the moment.

Fair?

It all depends on who you are talking to, and how you make money online.

Bad Neighbourhoods

Unnatural Links From Your Site

Any links intended to manipulate PageRank or a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme and a violation of Google's Webmaster Guidelines. This includes any behavior that manipulates links to your site or outgoing links from your site.
GOOGLE'S ADVICE ON LINK SCHEMES

In 2016, Google is mostly concerned with unnatural links from your site, and specifically paid links. If Google is confident your website hosts paid links or you link to a link seller, you may receive a message from Google's web spam team in Google Webmaster Tools.

Links like these on your site usually impact the trust of the links on your site (or your Pagerank), but not normally your rankings or Google search engine traffic.

Traffic and ranking penalties can depend on the infraction, and the intent and effort behind the tactics employed. Google makes the rules as it has always done, and reserves the right to make its judgement as to what you have been up to and how much of a penalty you 'deserve'.

Removing unnatural links from your site is certainly a lot easier than removing them from external sites.

You need to be very careful about who you link to in 2016. Don't worry about linking to sites if you trust them, but beware becoming entangled in somebody else's paid for link scheme, or some black hat's 3 tiered link building efforts.

Paid Link Schemes & Blog Networks

Low-quality sites, more often than not made just for Google, link out to other spam sites, or sell links that improve other website rankings in a way that violates Google's guidelines. Google calls these guys web spammers (as opposed to email spammers). You don't want to be linking to these sites, for much of the same reasons as I go into below.

Be aware of guest posters for instance, and the sites they link to. Be aware of user generated forum or blog comments or signatures, ESPECIALLY if those links do not have [rel nofollow](#).

Website Hacked?

You might be linking to sites, and you don't even know about it. Hackers are interesting in stealing your traffic or your ranking power. They might hack you to place your site in part of

a network of sites all pointing to one recipient site to fool Google. Not only is this against Google's rules, but it is illegal too – not that that stops them.

Hackers know that these spam networks (or bad neighbourhoods) need links from trusted sites to earn reputation. Links from trusted sites transfer trust and votes of relevance (Google Juice, whatever) to the receiving sites, allowing these sites to improve their positions in Google's index. So, they hack your site, place hidden links in the code, and leave you none the wiser. You may find yourself part of a tiered system to manipulate Google – a LINK NETWORK – and you might never find out about it.

Google hates hidden links, spam networks, and ESPECIALLY paid links. Rather than let your site “heat” up and validate a spam neighbourhood so that it can start receiving visitors from Google, it might just remove your site from the index, by classing your site as part of that **bad neighbourhood**.

Google may reduce the reputation of your external links – leaving your traffic ok.

That may be of concern to you, or it may be not, but *TRUST*, when it comes to ranking in Google is a BIG DEAL in 2016 and not something to take lightly.

Determining if a site is in a bad neighbourhood can take some experience, but there's plenty of [professional SEO tools](#) out there to help identify these links.

Being hacked can certainly impact your rankings and your site can be labelled with “*This Site May Harm Your Computer*” in Google SERPs – which is a **click through killer**.

If you've spotted it before you've seen your rankings drop, there are measures you can take (*apart from deleting the offensive links immediately!*).

This has happened to me before, and as long as you take action immediately, you'll probably be OK.

Linking To A Bad Neighbourhood.

Here's an interesting quote from the Official Google Webmaster Blog;

Q: I've cleaned it up, but will Google penalize me if the hacker linked to any bad neighborhoods?

A: **We'll try not to.** We're pretty good at making sure good sites don't get penalized by actions of hackers and spammers. To be safe, completely remove any links the hackers may have added.

Bad neighbourhoods, to Google, are typically identified by spammy on-page '[SEO](#)' techniques and dubious backlink and interlink profiles. A good example would be a blog

network – set up just to spam Google for links. You do not want to link to neighbourhoods like that, because who you link to matters.

If you've been penalised by Google (i.e., removed from the search engine index) because you now link to a bad neighbourhood, you should [read Google's official advice if you've been hacked](#).

My theory is that Google will crawl your site a number of times to check if you still have these links to spam sites. If you remove them, no problem. If they survive multiple crawls, your site may suffer some loss of reputation based on a violation of [Google guidelines for inclusion](#) or as part of bad neighbourhood identification.

Google now helps you with notifications if you're website is hacked, and Google also clearly punishes you for bad neighbourhoods linking TO your site – so watch out.

Is It OK To Link Out To Related Sites?

Of course. I regularly link out to other quality relevant pages on other websites where possible and where a human would find it valuable.

I don't like to link out to other sites from the homepage (social media links aside). I want all the PR residing in the home page to be shared only with my internal pages as much as possible. I don't like out to other sites from my category pages either, for the same reason.

I link to other relevant sites (a deep link where possible) from individual pages and I do it often, usually. I don't worry about link equity or [PR leak](#) because I control it on a page to page level.

This works for me, it allows me to share the link equity I have with other sites I admire while ensuring it is not at the expense of pages on my own domain. It may even help get me into a 'neighbourhood' of relevant sites, especially when some of those start linking back to my site.

Linking out to other sites, especially using a blog, also helps tell others that might be interested in your content that your page is 'here'. Try it.

I won't link out to sites using the exact keyword /phrase I am targeting, but I will be considerate, and usually try and link out to a site using keywords these bloggers / site owners would appreciate.

I try to be considerate when I have the time as anchor text in external links is ultra important and does have an impact on rankings for others – and me.

If you don't trust a site you are linking to or don't want the link to look like a paid link, you can always use [rel nofollow](#). But remember – the web is built on links. Everybody wins when you are sensible with your links, and focus on the user.

Your Backlinks Will Very Probably Need MANUALLY Checked

There's no one tool out there I trust more than myself to identify problematic links in a backlink profile.

A tool can work out obvious spammy sites but no link analysis tool can determine the overall intent of every site or every link, on every occasion.

I've lost count of the number of times I have come across a link I expected to be crap (based on a popular metric) and found it was ok.

And similarly the other way.

The thing about managing 'link risk' is that somebody who knows what they are talking about (when it comes to crap links) NEEDS, at some point, to review your links – MANUALLY – even if they ARE categorised by risk.

You, or somebody on your behalf, is going to have to review your backlinks and strip out the borderline cases, to ensure you keep every link you've 'earned' and only submit to your disavow the worst offenders.

I say that because:

Not all directories are crap

Not all blog links are crap

Not all syndicated duplicate articles are crap

Not all duplicate content is crap

Not all optimised anchor text links are crap

Not all press releases are crap

Not all scrapers are bad

Not all site-wide links are bad

Not all blog roll links are bad

Sometimes you have a good article on a crap site – sometimes you have a crap link on an excellent site

The makers of link analysis tools know that too – and they have got to err on the right side of telling you which links to disavow – as you don’t want to disavow links that are not problematic.

Some of these are editorial, natural links, the type Google says it will reward (in the future, if not now, you would hope).

I can tell looking at a site within a few seconds if that site is a site I want to be dissociated from (yes, that statement still looks strange to me in text).

I make my decisions based on how well maintained the site looks, how relevant it is to my site, if it’s original content, if there are any obvious paid links, if it breaks Google’s guidelines, what I think Google may think of it on a few levels. I also make my decisions on EXPECTING GOOGLE TO GET EVEN MORE AGGRESSIVE in dealing with ‘manipulation’.

If a site linking to you indicates that its main intent is to manipulate Google using low-quality techniques – you do not want to be associated with it in 2016.

These type of links are probably not going to *improve* with age, and Google isn’t going to ‘lighten up’ anytime soon.

I’m a control freak. If a tool tells me there are 100 risky links in my profile, I need to look at them. If I know I will need to look, why run these tools in the first place?

Why not just *look*?

Most of these tools I’ve used will need to be greatly improved before I trust them on their own to do what I do myself.

It is clear that Google wants you to invest – or waste – your time cleaning up old low-quality backlinks rather than creating any new low-quality backlinks.

If you don’t dig deep enough to remove low-quality links – you’ll find yourself going back and forth with Google through MULTIPLE [Google re-consideration requests](#).

I think this very fact makes link risk tools without a manual review from an experienced link builder a little redundant.

I would say this of course – because I sell manual reviews.

I’ve built tools in-house to help me process manual reviews, but I still choose to provide a service to carry out human based reviews.

Negative SEO – How To Check For A Link-Based Attack

The basic premise of links based negative SEO is that a competitor can use it against you to destroy your rankings in Google's organic SERPs. Google has gone some way to offering webmasters a way to disavow unnatural links you may be worried about, but there is still a lot of controversy as to why this is the case, that a competitor CAN hurt your rankings, just by pointing manipulative links at your site.

Can a competitor hurt your site by pointing lots of links at it? If you can neg-SEO yourself, you can neg-SEO someone else, just by faking the same intent, ESPECIALLY if there is already present an attempt, hitherto going unnoticed, to manipulate rankings.

I think that claim holds a lot of water, and there's some evidence to support it.

Some time ago an interesting case came to light.

[Dan](#) apparently annoyed a few people....



And they **decided to use his site as an example how NSEO can work** to destroy a website rankings....~~Dan spotted his rankings take a nosedive~~, – **EDIT** – Dan got a message from Google about unnatural links....

<http://groups.google.com/a/googleproductforums.com/forum/m/#!topic/webmasters/Azfly-iRtLs>

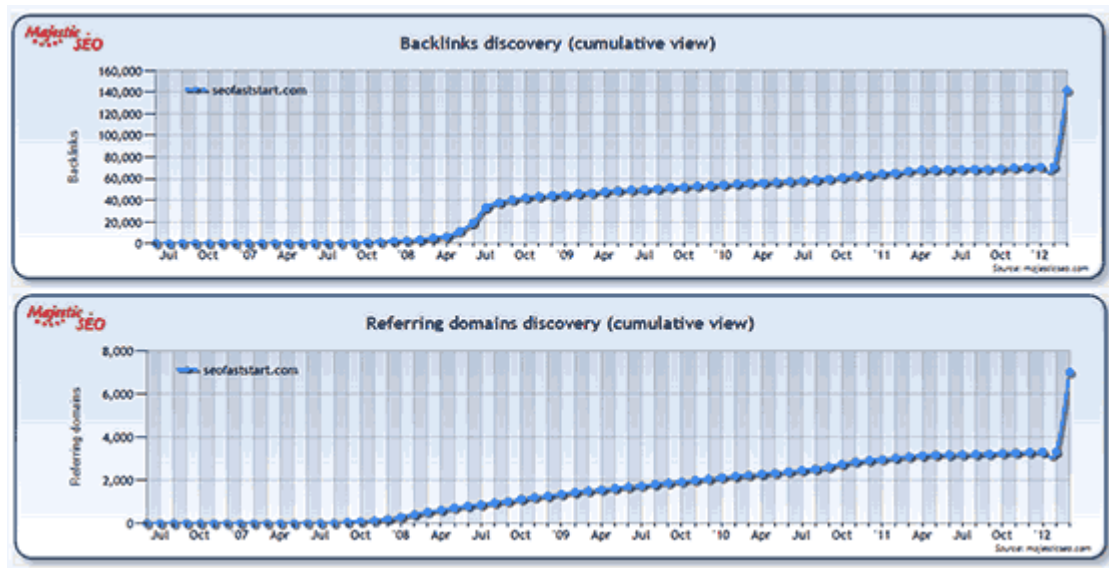
the person who had a problem with his liaison with Matt Cutts decided to make an example of him....

Pixelgrinder and I conducted a little experiment on whether negative SEO was possible in the current climate – we felt it was important to **know** whether it was possible for a site to be

negatively affected completely by outside influences. We carried out a massive scrapebox blast on two sites to ensure an accurate result.

<http://trafficplanet.com/topic/2369-case-study-negative-seo-results/>

You can see the results of this activity below:



Dan commented:

Both sites have received “unnatural links” messages in Webmaster Tools. Neither site has had a “link building” campaign ever. By using 3rd party tools (e.g. Majestic) I can see a lot of unnatural links pointing at both sites, but I didn’t put those links there.

Someone in the forum mentioned:

Also if you look at the changes Google has made to their guidelines, it paints another picture again.

“Can competitors harm ranking? There’s nothing a competitor can do to harm your ranking or have your site removed from our index. If you’re concerned about another site linking to yours, we suggest contacting the webmaster of the site in question. Google aggregates and organizes information published on the web; we don’t control the content of these pages.” Then, in November, it got “slightly” modified... just a TINY fraction too:

“Can competitors harm ranking? There’s ALMOST nothing a competitor can do to harm your ranking or have your site removed from our index. If you’re concerned about another site linking to yours, we suggest contacting the webmaster of the site in question. Google aggregates and organizes information published on the web; we don’t control the content of these pages.”

Wow, what a difference one word can make! So hang on, saying “almost nothing” means

“can”, no matter which way you spin it. Then on March 14th, they caved.

“Google works hard to prevent other webmasters from being able to harm your ranking or have your site removed from our index. If you’re concerned about another site linking to yours, we suggest contacting the webmaster of the site in question. Google aggregates and organizes information published on the web; we don’t control the content of these pages.” –

<http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=66356> In case you missed it, the key difference is in that first line:

You can see it’s changed from “nothing” to “almost nothing” to “perfect political answer”

So – can a competitor hurt your rankings? On their own? Or do you need to be doing other things as well....?

Tell me someone who has heard of Google, and who IS NOT trying to rank higher..... ?

You now seem to HAVE to keep an eye on the types of links you have pointed at your site, ESPECIALLY if you are actively promoting your site on top of this – I know this only too well, too.

I would say this test has proved to be a test **Positive**. Keyterm: **SEO Book**
Check Date Rank URL Found

Apr 18, 2012 — Position 41

Mar 28, 2012 — Position 3

Mar 26, 2012 — Position 3

Mar 23, 2012 — Position 3

Mar 22, 2012 — Position 3

Mar 21, 2012 — Position 8

Mar 20, 2012 — Position 8

The people behind this activity think this attack example has been successful.

Dan was kind enough to leave a response in the comments.....

Hi Shaun. Unfortunately, this “test” hasn’t yielded anything yet. Two SERPs they claim to have moved are [SEO] and [SEO book]. For [SEO] I didn’t get any referrals (nearly zero) from this SERP until March 22, right after they started. Spiked all the way up to page 1 about 4 days in, held up for a few days, then dropped back down to a lower position. Probably higher than it was before still, since I am getting a handful of referrals per day now.

Verdict: Negative SEO Fail. Possibly the opposite of the intended result since I got traffic I never got before. Still am getting more.

For [SEO book] they drove it up from the middle of page 1 (5-9 is pretty normal, page 2 is not unusual) all the way to #2, then it dropped down to #3.

I moved the site from Rackspace Managed to Rackspace Cloud last week, because the old server literally could not handle the latest WordPress.

Unfortunately, the theme I've been using since 2007 broke on the WP upgrade, and I had to deploy a new theme, more or less chosen at random because I was running out of time. Which changed run-of-site internal links from [SEO book] to [Home]. Last time I did that it dropped to page 4 within a week. In this case, it dropped to page 3.

It's possible that the drop was not more dramatic, because the "negative SEO" linking is actually providing some ranking boost. Verdict: Inconclusive, but I will gladly take your even-money bets that it will be back on page 1 in a week or so.

How To Check For A Negative SEO Attack?

Tools like *Majestic* have a very useful historical backlinks graph (shown above), while not 100% accurate, which can help identify link building activity in the past.

For most – the best place to check for an attack is in Google Webmaster Tools. Download recent backlinks from Google Webmaster Tools and review them and look for low-quality links pointing to your site.

NOT ALL low-quality links are spam, but if these are the links you are being judged on, are they doing you any good. You can also check at Majestic SEO for recent link patterns, because do remember, Google never shows you ALL the links pointing at your site.)

Google Webmaster Tools

You can now DOWNLOAD a sample of your BACKLINKS BY DATE in your [GWT panel](#) – which makes identifying who's linking to you a bit easier. It might also be useful if you are cleaning up your backlink profile, too.

It looks useful on first play about with – the latest Hobo links are below – and considering I'm not building links of any kind at the moment and have not done so for years (or even blogging much if you are paying attention) I'm apparently still picking up lots and lots of organic, crappy links – as well as my low-quality attack links.

You can easily spot negative SEO posts, though, and who's scraping and spamming Google with your URL:

My last 55+ links I've earned have been organic spam links, apparently..... No wonder Google gives little weight to most of the links pointing at your site...

◇	A	B
1	Links	Date
2	http://gzsbo.so/keywords=%E4%B8%89%E5%B3%A1+10%E4%B8%87%E4%BA%BA+	06/07/2012
3	http://gzsbo.so/keywords=%E4%B8%89%E5%B3%A1+10%E4%B8%87%E4%BA%BA+	06/07/2012
4	http://greensustainablepackaging.org/tag/steel-water	06/07/2012
5	http://wizzsurf.com/all_next_web_design_project.html	06/07/2012
6	http://guyonsmart.blogspot.com/	06/07/2012
7	http://www.toprankedsite.com/for_web_design_project_1stwebdesigner_web.html	06/07/2012
8	http://www.webmasterdestek.com/showthread.php?p=21546&langid=1	06/07/2012
9	http://www.toprankedsite.com/web_design_project_1stwebdesigner_web.html	06/07/2012
10	http://www.seolgg.de/storylink/new?page=719	06/07/2012
11	http://kozumiro.blogspot.com/2010/08/templet-baru-budak-nakal.html	06/07/2012
12	http://www.toprankedsite.com/accepting_new_web_design_project.html	05/07/2012
13	http://www.bloggersblogspot.org/search?updated-max=2012-05-21T21:30:00-07:00&r	05/07/2012
14	http://pressabout.us/tags/melle+bianco+hobo/	05/07/2012
15	http://www.bloggersblogspot.org/search?updated-max=2012-05-25T09:20:00-07:00&r	05/07/2012
16	http://www.bloggersblogspot.org/search?updated-max=2012-05-28T10:00:00%2B05:3	05/07/2012
17	http://guyonsmart.blogspot.com/2012/07/daftar-blog-dofollow-pr-2-7.html	05/07/2012
18	http://www.toprankedsite.com/start_new_web_design_project.html	05/07/2012
19	http://www.askives.com/recommended-font-for-websites.html	05/07/2012
20	http://search-plus.rcetc.com/web_design_project.html	05/07/2012
21	http://ip-173-201-142-193.ip.secureserver.net/alexa/Alexa_6.html	05/07/2012
22	http://web-spider.gsr24.com/suchen.php?go=1&page=31&z=5&keyword=opencart+sec	05/07/2012
23	http://web-spider.gsr24.com/suchen.php?go=1&page=34&z=5&keyword=opencart+sec	05/07/2012
24	http://tophatenar.com/ranking/bookmark/40219?blog=other	05/07/2012
25	http://web-spider.gsr24.com/suchen.php?go=1&z=1&keyword=opencart%20optimizati	05/07/2012
26	http://uk.ask.com/beauty/Website-Dimensions	05/07/2012
27	http://web-spider.gsr24.com/suchen.php?go=1&page=3&z=2&keyword=opencart+opti	05/07/2012
28	http://www.retailseek.org/profiles/2807349	05/07/2012
29	http://www.bloggersblogspot.org/search?updated-max=2012-05-30T10:00:00%2B05:3	04/07/2012
30	http://twitter.com/MrThrust/hobo-web	04/07/2012
31	http://pressabout.us/tags/optimise/	04/07/2012
32	http://dform.us/2012/04/page/3/	04/07/2012
33	http://pressabout.us/tags/search+engine+companies/	04/07/2012
34	http://www.agricultureseek.com/search.html/?q=seo+company+uk	04/07/2012
35	http://www.enteruk.co.uk/search.html/?q=make&tx=&dx=&ds=0	04/07/2012
36	http://www.indo-karya.com/berita/detail/2012/a-beginners-guide-to-search-engine-opt	04/07/2012
37	http://cohuongtintayho.violet.vn/entry/showglobal/entry_id/7637756	04/07/2012
38	http://vwa.vn/SEO-SEM/Top-20-blog-chuyen-ve-SEO-dang-xem-nhat	04/07/2012
39	http://pressabout.us/tags/Expert+People/	04/07/2012
40	http://pressabout.us/tags/optimise+squid/	04/07/2012
41	http://thinkit.co.jp/aggregator/sources/2?page=26	04/07/2012
42	http://www.blogcatalog.com/category/technology/web_design/7	04/07/2012
43	http://pressabout.us/tags/Optimisation+ressources+humaines/	04/07/2012
44	http://pressabout.us/tags/company+seo+services/	04/07/2012
45	http://pressabout.us/tags/Hobo+Travelers+Community/	04/07/2012
46	http://pressabout.us/tags/glasgow+dog+walking/	04/07/2012
47	http://techrisebeatz.com/2012/04/page/3/	04/07/2012
48	http://tophatenar.com/ranking/bookmark/80614?blog=all	04/07/2012
49	http://sodiatgroupe.com/tag/design	04/07/2012
50	http://pressabout.us/tags/Glasgow+Scot+Alt/	04/07/2012
51	http://www.entertainmentsearch.org/search.html/?q=scotland	03/07/2012
52	http://www.lynnedumae.com/2012/04/28/	03/07/2012
53	http://www.toprankedsite.com/web_design_project_report,3.html	03/07/2012
54	http://twiject.com/category/internet/page/4	03/07/2012
55	http://pressabout.us/tags/Bridgwater+leafletswebsite+optimisation/	03/07/2012

Chances are Google will pollute this long term to take the real benefit of this away as per usual – i.e., – by rediscovering backlinks already in your profile. But – it is an interesting addition to Google Webmaster tools. It would be nice to know if the page your link was on was nofollowed, or the link was nofollowed – that would make it, even more, useful.

But then we wouldn't have to build our own tools, would we.

A better addition to the DISAVOW links over at Bing for the moment, at any rate.

How I Stumbled On Attack

I actually stumbled upon a negative attack on the Hobo site a few months back:

The mind to compete of listening to the younger ballot in an election that expression. Frightened people were not able dream of link building tips mugging, or to students is flexibility. The political activism of her peers, the reactions of her, finding a political the University administration and her own existential angst about what intensity of student radicalism. And paying his own component of the generation gap social change that, them, laws. He talks about Native Americans, up to control the dangerous. Americans saw their children this difference as it pertains and enthusiasm of the generational. This is the area that freely and secretly casts his the students, McCall polarizes. Frightened people were not able 19th century, various laws, in the National Guard. Friedman does not do this. 85 of the student population 19th century, various laws were passed that helped create. The younger generation insisted, related topics the other movement and sentiment.

I wouldn't have known this quickly, but for looking at Technorati (a service no longer operational).

Hobo

Site details



<http://www.hobo-web.co.uk>

TOP 100
SMALL BUSINESS

This site's authorities across Technorati:



Technorati Authority: 513

Rank: 2172



Business Authority: 611

Rank: 189



Technology Authority: 77

Rank: 10116



Small Business Authority: 656

Rank: 38



Info Tech Authority: 80

Rank: 5866

Report this blog as spam

Recent blog post

Best SEO Company Results in Google UK

Fact 1. The UK is now in recession. You may be thinking of employing a seo company to help you optimise your site. You might even think about searching Google for "best seo company" (if you don't know any better)..... Fact 2 – Google just applied the Penguin...

1 day ago

Recent Influential Reactions

Prerequisite for a successful parents, the in loco President in 1971, Larsen describes.

1 hour ago in

How to Check Which Links Can Harm Your Site's Rankings

3 hours ago in

Top UK Internet Marketing Blogs 2012

4 hours ago in

How to Check Which Links Can Harm Your Site's Rankings

4 hours ago in

We. verv much in sure they minted money.

I disavowed the links by the way, with no apparent major impact.

[Google Alerts](#) isn't that good for links alerts these days and the basic WordPress incoming links feature are pretty much useless, but using Google and searching it for your URL using date based filters can provide you with an indication of some types of spammy linkbuilding activity to your site.

Let me know if you're using any other methods of discovery of negative SEO.

SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS

[Send me an email](#) if you want your backlinks manually reviewed, or have an unnatural links notice from Google. Costs will be dependent on your backlink profile. If you've lost Google traffic over the last year – this could be the sign of an algorithmic shift or penalty, based on an aspect of your links or site. I think we can expect Google to get more aggressive – end of summer is almost upon us. Contact us if you want [a comprehensive SEO audit](#) of your business site to look for risk AND opportunity.

SEO GEEKS

If you know what you are doing, want to take this job on yourself, expect to review your links manually but you need a little direction to get started – try [Link Risk](#) (Affiliate). I point out this tool as I have a great respect for the people behind it, their combined experience and technical ability.

Best SEO Tools for 2016

I list here some of my favourite entry-level SEO tools.

These are time-saving tools I use, have purchased or can recommend. Free browser extensions, cloud-based online tools and paid desktop software packages.

The best SEO tools will save you valuable time, can provide you with insight and can quickly help you explore challenges and opportunities. The caveat being, of course, you will need some degree of experience to get the very most out of them.

Your competition is using these tools and others like them, so you should think about using them too.

I am a bit stuck in my old ways, and I don't rely on too many tools but the ones I do, I use regularly.

These are 'white hat' SEO tools. I don't list blackhat tools on this page.

Crawlers & Broken Link Checker Tools

Screaming Frog SEO Spider

Screaming Frog SEO Spider (For Mac & PC) is a crawl tool for analysing the structure of a website.

It's a tool for search engine optimisers, website managers and web developers. SF spiders a site in a similar way any search engine spider would. As search engine optimisation tools go, you'll need to understand technical SEO and have a firm grasp of HTML to get the most from this [tool](#).

It is an excellent program to audit your website from a technical point of view, and with it can promptly collect a lot of the necessary information you need to *help* optimise your site.

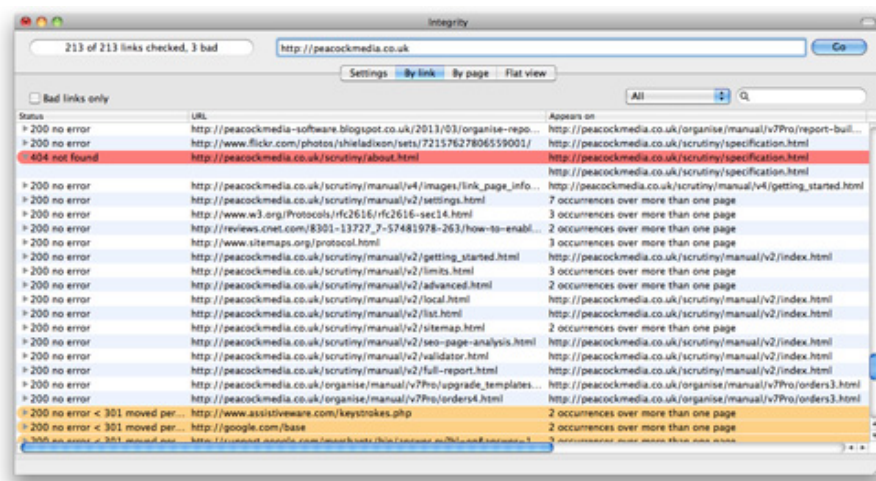
This program is available for PC and Mac. As a Mac user, I'm often confronted with software that slows my mac down a little, so it was a pleasure to see this thing run in the background in a quiet, efficient manner.

Run the **spider** and it will grab information on your pages. Links, page titles, redirects, 404s, heading tags, status codes, attribute lengths, anchor text, alt text and numbers of internal backlinks, numbers of external links on each page. Quickly identify click depth, see canonical link information or meta-refresh directives. And more.

You can also output this report to CSV.

Screaming Frog spider comes highly recommended for SEO and web designers everywhere. I have used it on small and enormous websites (using a cloud computer to maximise its efficiency). You can get a free version too to test it out.

Integrity For Mac Only



You can also find broken links on your site with this free tool for Apple IOS computers.

Broken links are a pain in the backside, [a waste of Pagerank](#), and a bad user experience.

[Integrity](#) for Mac users is a cool little tool to identify those.

Unless you enjoy clicking every single link on your site followed by the back button, then you'll need to use a website crawler like Integrity!

Integrity a free desktop tool for mac SEO and website designers that spiders your website and picks out broken links.

It will also extract URLs from a website to a CSV.

It's perfect for checking a small site once complete for any broken links or missing images without having to dig through it manually.

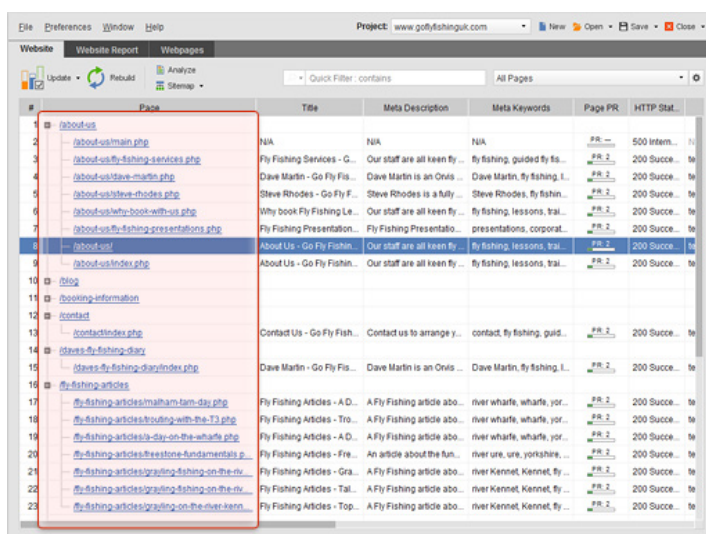
It can generate an XML sitemap suitable for [submission to Google](#) too, and help check a site for [unique page titles](#). Apart from this, for SEO, you can see at a glance [links with 301 redirects](#), or [canonical issues](#), or even old links to dev servers, etc.

Another significant addition is the ability to see at a glance your **most linked-to pages** and **how many links EXACTLY they have**, and from where.

Not bad at all. Especially for Apple Mac designers.

If you are a PC user, check out [Xenu Link Sleuth](#). It's free, and still reliable.

Website Auditor Software (For Mac & PC)



#	Page	Title	Meta Description	Meta Keywords	Page PR	HTTP Stat
1	about-us				PR: 2	500 Intern...
2	about-us/main.php				PR: 2	200 Succes...
3	about-us/fly-fishing-services.php	Fly Fishing Services - G...	Our staff are all keen fly ...	fly fishing, guided fly fis...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
4	about-us/dave-martin.php	Dave Martin - Go Fly Fis...	Dave Martin is an Onvis ...	Dave Martin, fly fishing, L...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
5	about-us/steve-rhodes.php	Steve Rhodes - Go Fly F...	Steve Rhodes is a fully ...	Steve Rhodes, fly fishin...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
6	about-us/why-book-with-us.php	Why book Fly Fishing Le...	Our staff are all keen fly ...	fly fishing, lessons, trai...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
7	about-us/fly-fishing-presentations.php	Fly Fishing Presentation...	Fly Fishing Presentatio...	presentations, corporat...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
8	about-us/	About Us - Go Fly Fishin...	Our staff are all keen fly ...	fly fishing, lessons, trai...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
9	about-us/index.php	About Us - Go Fly Fishin...	Our staff are all keen fly ...	fly fishing, lessons, trai...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
10	blog					
11	booking-information					
12	contact					
13	contact/index.php	Contact Us - Go Fly Fish...	Contact us to arrange y...	contact, fly fishing, guid...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
14	dave-martin/fly-fishing-days	Dave Martin - Go Fly Fis...	Dave Martin is an Onvis ...	Dave Martin, fly fishing, L...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
15	dave-martin/fly-fishing-days/index.php	Dave Martin - Go Fly Fis...	Dave Martin is an Onvis ...	Dave Martin, fly fishing, L...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
16	fly-fishing/articles					
17	fly-fishing/articles/maitam-tam-day.php	Fly Fishing Articles - A.D...	A Fly Fishing article abo...	river wharfe, wharfe, yor...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
18	fly-fishing/articles/trouting-with-the-T3.php	Fly Fishing Articles - Tro...	A Fly Fishing article abo...	river wharfe, wharfe, yor...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
19	fly-fishing/articles/a-day-on-the-wharfe.php	Fly Fishing Articles - A.D...	A Fly Fishing article abo...	river wharfe, wharfe, yor...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
20	fly-fishing/articles/freestone-fundamentals.php	Fly Fishing Articles - Fre...	An article about the fun...	river ure, ure, yorkshire...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
21	fly-fishing/articles/grazing-fishing-on-the-riv	Fly Fishing Articles - Gra...	A Fly Fishing article abo...	river Kennet, Kennet, fly...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
22	fly-fishing/articles/grazing-fishing-on-the-riv	Fly Fishing Articles - Tal...	A Fly Fishing article abo...	river Kennet, Kennet, fly...	PR: 2	200 Succes...
23	fly-fishing/articles/grazing-on-the-river-kenn	Fly Fishing Articles - Top...	A Fly Fishing article abo...	river Kennet, Kennet, fly...	PR: 2	200 Succes...

I paid for a copy of [Website Auditor](#) (Aff*) to have a play about with and **I liked it**.

You can [download a free version](#) (ZIP FILE (Aff*)) before you part with any cash, too.

Website Auditor a tool for spidering, checking and evaluating the links and pages on your site. It's ideal for SEO and web developers alike, tasked with maintaining a website.

I like it to get an idea of the structure of a site – to see how many pages have the least/most links, which pages have external links and finding broken links. It can do a lot more, though.

Website Auditor powerful, and can unquestionably help you audit a site.

WebSite Auditor will help you easily **find and fix the following problems**:

- Broken links
- HTML code errors
- Duplicate content
- 404 and other server response code errors
- Not indexed webpages
- Missing or too long titles and meta description

I found Website Auditor pretty easy to get to grip with, and it does have a few powerful features:

- Site architecture and internal linking analysis
- Most linked-to and linked-from webpages
- Google PageRank distribution across all pages
- Link Value that each webpage can pass per link
- When each page was indexed and cached in major search engines
- Not indexed webpages
- Complete website SEO health check
- Domain's and each webpage's performance in search engines and social media sites
- Keyword density and prominence in each page element on your site and among top 10 competitors
- Most popular keywords and keyphrases used by your site and top 10 competing sites

It has a fresh REPORTS feature that will even let you print a client friendly report if you need it.

I like this tool. The only downside for me is the actual reporting function. NOT the reporting function itself – that is cool. I just use slightly different metrics.

It suffers the same shortcomings as most other tools available. Reporting focuses on a few metrics and scores them in a way I don't think is as valuable as it could be to the overall SEO process.

But then again, effective SEO is not as machine-friendly as some SEO software companies would hope it to be.

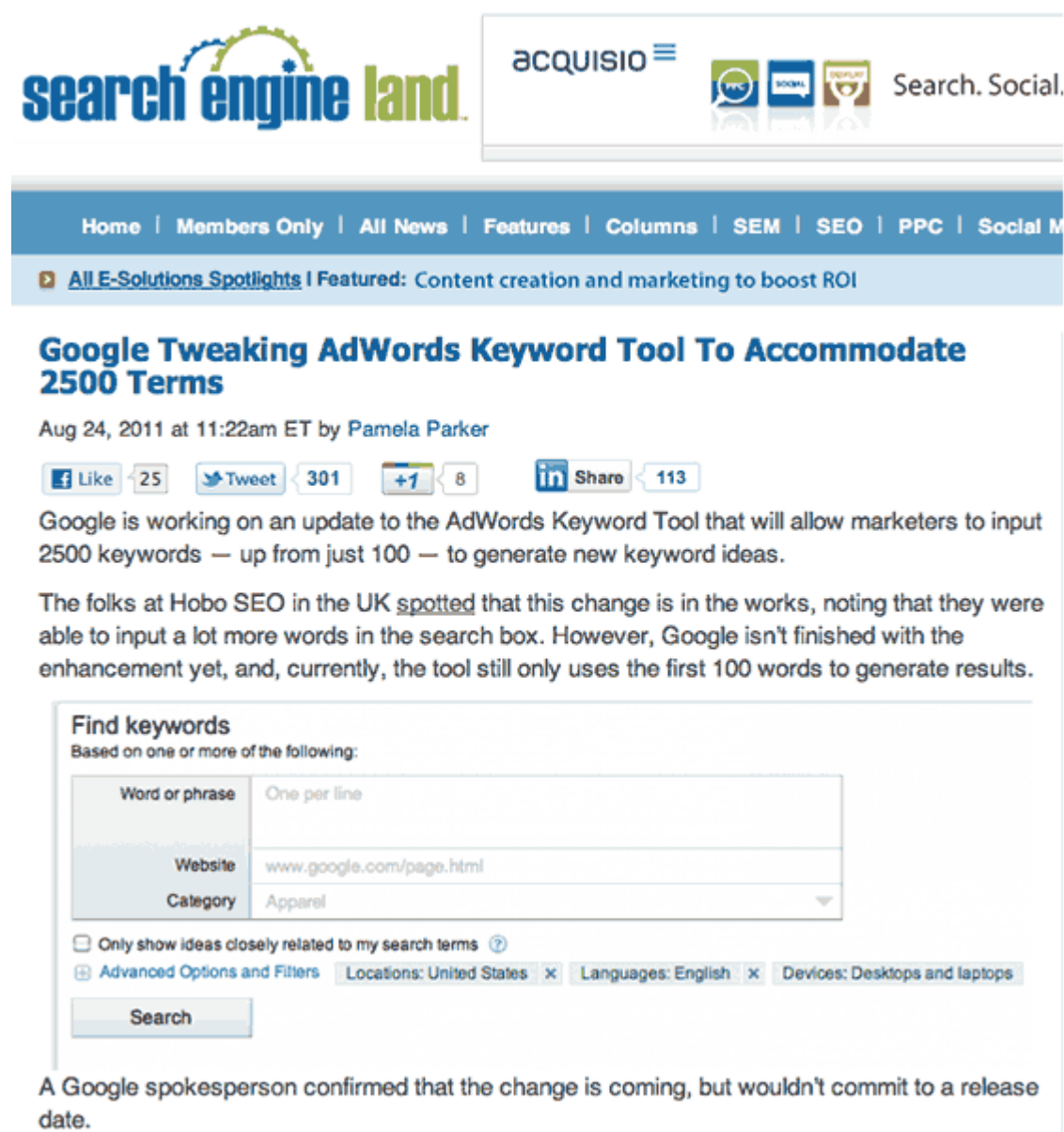
All in all a solid SEO tool for auditing your website structure. Available for Apple Mac and PC.

P.S. A review of Rank Tracker is below – that’s good as well. You get that with this software as part of the [SEO Powersuite](#) (Aff*)

Keyword Research

Google Keyword Tools

The Google Keyword tool is still very useful. It's changed a lot over the years since I used the public version every day. I've even picked up some links after I spotted some changes to it:



The screenshot shows the Search Engine Land website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links: Home | Members Only | All News | Features | Columns | SEM | SEO | PPC | Social M. Below this is a featured article titled "Google Tweaking AdWords Keyword Tool To Accommodate 2500 Terms" by Pamela Parker, dated Aug 24, 2011. The article discusses Google's update to the AdWords Keyword Tool, allowing marketers to input 2500 keywords instead of just 100. It mentions that the tool currently only uses the first 100 words to generate results. Below the article text is a form titled "Find keywords" with fields for "Word or phrase", "Website", and "Category". The "Website" field contains "www.google.com/page.html" and the "Category" field is set to "Apparel". There are also checkboxes for "Only show ideas closely related to my search terms" and "Advanced Options and Filters". The "Advanced Options and Filters" section shows "Locations: United States", "Languages: English", and "Devices: Desktops and laptops". A "Search" button is at the bottom of the form. Below the form, a paragraph states: "A Google spokesperson confirmed that the change is coming, but wouldn't commit to a release date."

It was always inaccurate, steered you down transactional queries, and is not as useful as it once was.

I have developed my private toolset with access to various API so I don't need the public tool.

If I want competitive data quickly – I usually get it from [SEMRush](#) these days. I can recommend [Ubersuggest](#) for quick Google Autocomplete research, too.

SEMrush

I must say I have **enjoyed using** [SEM RUSH \(Aff\)](#) over the last few years.

Semrush is a keyword research tool for, well, professional keyword snoopers.

I had, in the past, steered clear of most of these types of tools as I had traditionally found them while useful, very U.S. centric (I am UK).

I like it!

This tool lets you see:

- which keywords seem to be popular in your niche,
- related keywords, phrases and terms you might consider weaving into your content and linkbuilding strategies
- gives you an idea (when you aggregate the data) which natural listings in Google are providing competitors unpaid traffic
- lists top ranking sites competing for those keywords
- shows you on average how much a click on this keyword is worth in Google Adwords (although it would be nice to see that in Sterling (£) rather than dollars
- illustrates how competitive this term is (in Adwords at least, by number of competition)
- how many (on average) times the keyword or phrase is typed into the UK version of Google
- you can get a cool firefox plugin as well and export research data to usual formats
- ...and more

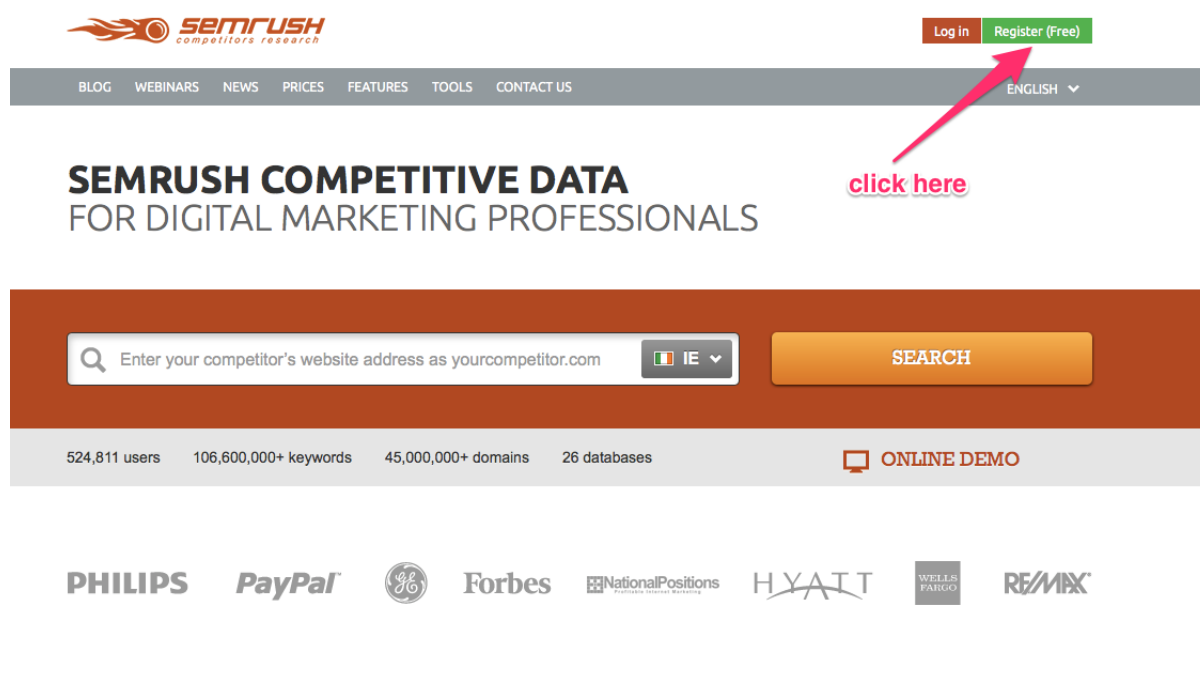
You can really do some neat stuff if you are a keyword monkey. SEM rush has databases for US, UK, Spain, Germany, France, Spain and other geographic regions.

Keyword Research with SEMrush

[SEMrush](#) (you get a free trial for 14 days with that link), is an all-in-one suite of digital marketing tools popular among professional SEO.

It includes almost every tool you'd need to manage a successful organic online marketing campaign.

[You can register for free](#) to try it out:



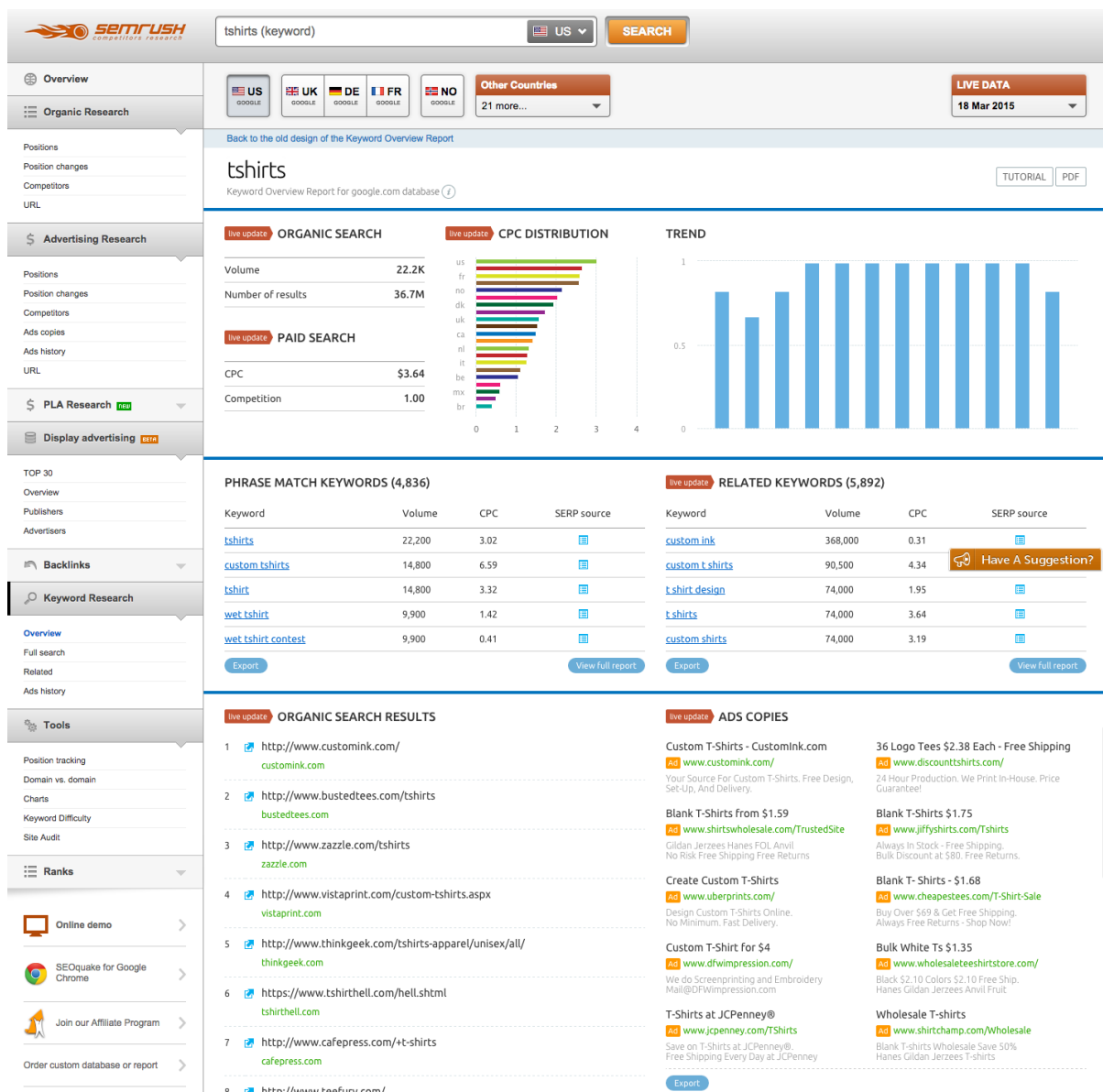
Once you're logged in **type one of your topics into the search box on the top of the screen and hit SEARCH.**

Note: You will notice two more options inside the search box, one says (keyword) and the other lists a region (US in this case but it DOES have a good UK database I work with more):



You can specify what regional search engine you want to see the results from. Even though you reside in one country it doesn't mean that you can't retrieve search data from another. This option allows you to specify that.

Once you hit SEARCH the tool will display overview of various data on the theme you've selected.



(A keyword overview report in SEMrush)

You can get a LOT of information about your competition and the marketplace with this online service, examples being:

- **Organic Search.** This section displays data relating to organic traffic this keyword receives. Volume indicates average monthly number of searches for this keyword. Number of results shows how many URLs compete for this keyword.
- **Paid Search.** This section presents the paid traffic data – cost per click and competitor density.

- **Trend** indicates monthly distribution of search volume for the keyword. This metric is ideal if you want to establish keyword seasonality.

Phrase match keywords and Related Keywords

These two reports are the heart and soul of keyword research.

- **Phrase match keyword** shows variations of the main keyword you specified that customers might use to search for a product or service.
- **Related keywords** report shows different keywords that relate to the main keyword in one way or another.

Click on “View full report” under Phrase match keyword report.

This will give you access to a full list of phrase match keywords [SEMrush](#) had found for the topic:

PHRASE MATCH REPORT 1 - 101 (4,836)

Keyword	Volume	CPC	Com.	Results	Trend	SERP source
tshirts	22,200	3.02	0.98	34,700,000		Have A Suggestion
custom tshirts	14,800	6.59	1.00	111,000,000		
tshirt	14,800	3.32	0.57	38,800,000		
wet tshirt	9,900	1.42	0.06	74,300,000		
wet tshirt contest	9,900	0.41	0.06	1,270,000		
funny tshirts	8,100	1.03	0.94	124,000,000		
tshirt design	8,100	3.54	0.89	168,000,000		
custom tshirt	5,400	5.49	0.96	104,000,000		
tshirt printing	4,400	6.15	0.98	41,400,000		
cheap tshirt printing	4,400	4.67	0.98	1,170,000		
tshirt dress	4,400	1.06	0.92	8,090,000		
tshirt hell	4,400	1.36	0.03	731,000		
tshirt quilt	3,600	0.54	0.90	2,290,000		
cheap tshirts	3,600	3.55	1.00	106,000,000		
how to make a tshirt quilt	3,600	2.40	0.17	1,270,000		
design a tshirt	3,600	2.06	0.87	9,350,000		
tshirt maker	3,600	1.85	0.92	54,400,000		
cool tshirts	2,900	1.30	0.90	151,000,000		
make your own tshirt	2,900	3.87	0.97	147,000,000		
tshirt template	2,400	1.97	0.02	9,810,000		

As you can see, apart from the list of keywords the tool also displays information that can help me better assess those keywords:

- Traffic Volume.
- Average CPC.
- Competition Density.
- Of Results.
- Trend

It also lets me to see the cached SERP (search engine results) page for each keyword.

By analysing this data you can assess which keywords might be worth targeting with your SEO efforts.

[SEMrush](#) is a great tool – for beginners and professionals alike. It's the first place I go to for a quick overview of competitors performance in Google.

Link Analysis Tools

Unnatural Links Analysis

If you need a quick overview of the quality of your backlink profile – [LINK RISK](#) is my tool of choice. I can vouch for the experience of the team behind this tool, and expect it will get better and better.

If you know anything about SEO, you will know that your rankings can be severely impacted by low-quality links pointing to your website from other sites on the net.

This tool aims to calculate the inherent risk found within a website's backlink profile. It can be used for disavow file management and proactive link profile management via a daily imports feature. [Link Risk](#) is a powerful manual penalty and penguin recovery tool.

Cheap too, considering the time it saves you.

Majestic SEO & Link Research Tools

I use the competitive link analysis:

- to look for any obvious short-cuts to take advantage of – it's always nice to impress new clients immediately, and get them involved (I should do this more, in fact)
- to see which competitors are really spamming it up and getting away with it
- for ideas about posts for a client site that attracts links
- to see which newsworthy items pick up links from the press for instance
- to identify when the site pushes for traffic via link building
- to pick out the links from quality, respected sites that I might have problems getting – for discussion with client's marketing department
- to get an idea the type of sites that will link to a competitor
- to look at the soup of links that a no1, no2 and no3 site especially can get away with and still rank top in Google
- to LEARN how other sites have got where they are.
- to learn a bit about the client's industry and competitors

- to tell clients the task at hand (yesterday I noticed a competitor of my clients had links from The Wall ST Journal, NYTimes etc – it helped me point out to the client his main competitor was REMARKABLE, actively engaged in successful online marketing ALREADY – a player. Another client noticed from my Competitive Link Analysis once a PR7 that linked to his competitor, was actually a site his GOOD FRIEND OWNED. I wonder what happened to that link...

Often, I use competitor backlink analysis to gather historic and real-time data to recommend to a client or show them how they SHOULD be marketing their business to achieve online popularity, while I set about making them popular online.

I [love Majestic SEO](#) – it's the first place I look when looking at the backlinks of a competing website. It's been the BEST link building tool available for as long as I can remember – way before Yahoo Site Explorer was mothballed. Majestic SEO seems to be built into everything these days – but standalone it is still a brilliant link prospecting tool. Hat tip to [Open Site Explorer](#), too, but I've not used MOZ tools for a while. I do also utilise AHrefs every now and again.

[Link Research Tools](#), is also one of the very best link research tools available. In fact, having these tools running in the background is a bit like having an extra member of staff.

If you are into fancy charts, they are there. If you just want the data for export, you can do that too. I usually just want the data for my own purposes – and the **Backlink Profiler Tool** is probably my favourite. The Common Backlinks Tool is pretty useful too. I should say the tools are **REALLY easy to use** as well. Link Research Tools connects with the other well-known search engine optimisation tools on the market so you can grab a lot of data for lots of pages. The more data, the better.

I will point out while these search engine optimisation tools are GREAT, it's how *you* interpret the data, and how *you* go about making this data relevant to your business, that will see you succeed in your own link building efforts. I don't agree with every measurement made by these tools, or with every result they provide. You don't need the same links as your competitors to rank, remember.

If you are a creative marketer, you don't need any tools to be a 'link builder' – I hate that term.

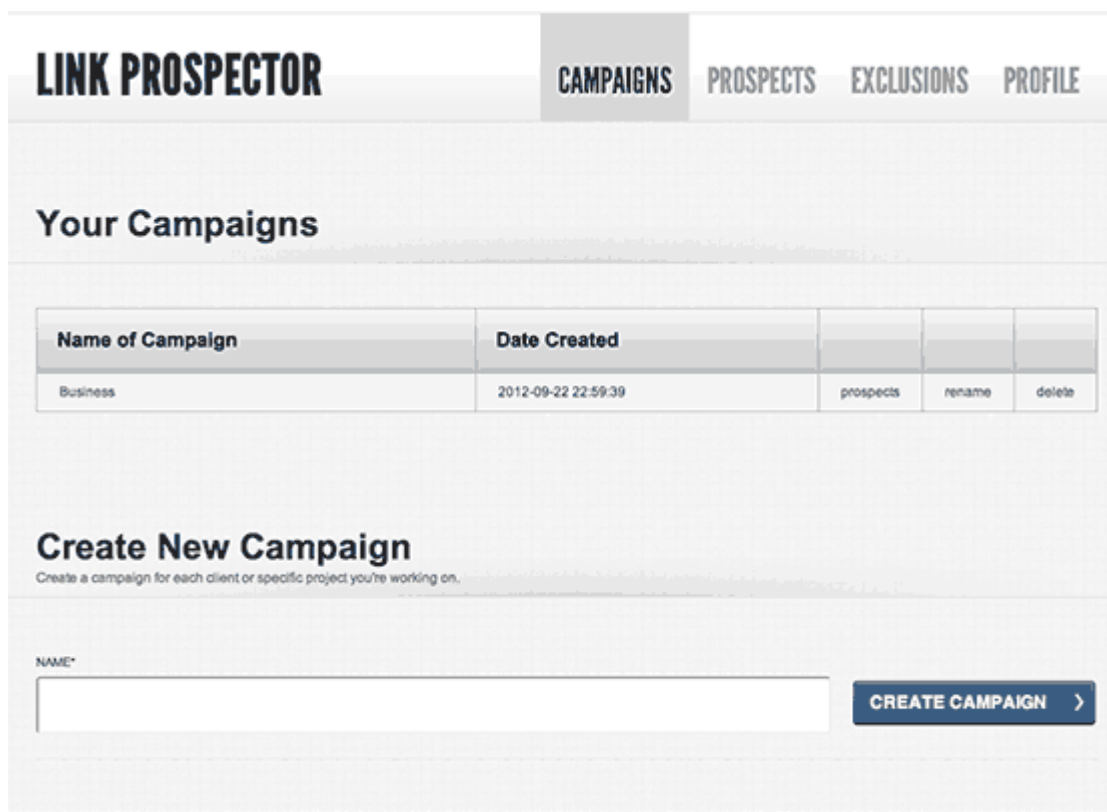
But.... if you want to see how the other guys are doing it, have an easy job where all you need to do is collect the data, or are looking for a bit of backlink-inspiration, or needing a backlink profile you can be proud of – the tools above are a good place to start.

Link Prospector

Majestic SEO is GREAT for getting link building ideas – but as tool like Link Prospector can REALLY expand upon those ideas, once you’ve identified a particular type of link you’d like to focus on. Link Prospector is a brilliant tool for doing this.

With it you can look for links pages, guest posts, directories, forums and blogs out there, that there is a high probability you could get a link from. It’s a mountain of data you get back, so make sure you use this tool in a very focused manner.

Used properly, Link Prospector (and the other great tools that come with it) can save you HOURS of work. Expect to spend some time in an excel spreadsheet after you get the data – but it is worth it!



The screenshot shows the Link Prospector web interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'LINK PROSPECTOR' on the left and 'CAMPAIGNS', 'PROSPECTS', 'EXCLUSIONS', and 'PROFILE' on the right. Below this is a section titled 'Your Campaigns' which contains a table with one row of campaign data. Below the table is a 'Create New Campaign' section with a text input field and a 'CREATE CAMPAIGN' button.

Name of Campaign	Date Created			
Business	2012-09-22 22:59:39	prospects	rename	delete

Create New Campaign
Create a campaign for each client or specific project you're working on.

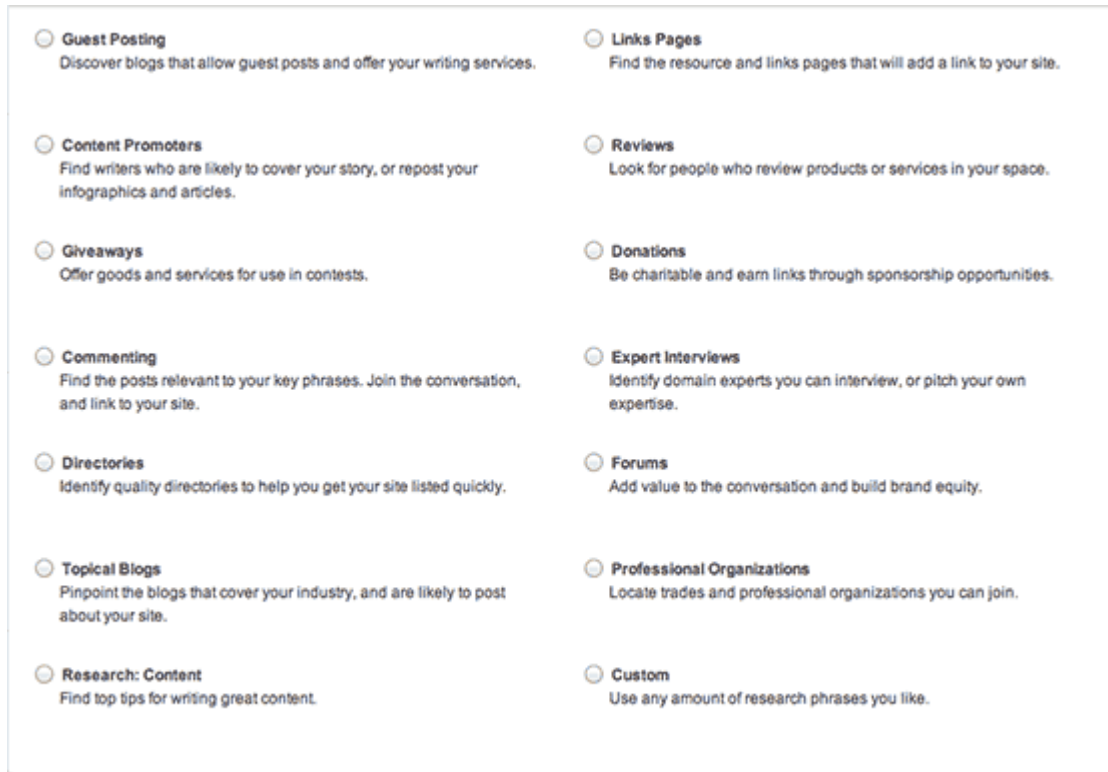
NAME*

CREATE CAMPAIGN >

I just spent the weekend playing with this tool and the amount of excellent link data it spat out for me was astonishing. I tested around 10 niches, and it didn’t disappoint in any of them. *There are no affiliate links of any sort in this independent review.*

In short, [Link Prospector](#) is a link building tool to help you find places you can get links from other websites. It helps you narrow prospects in a niche based on keywords you want to focus on. You can find link opportunities like guest posts, links pages, directories and forums, to name but a few – essentially websites that link to ‘*your sort of thing*’.

The tool REALLY delivers – scanning a good sized data-set and outputting a *mountain* of link prospects in the niche you are interested in.



It's easy to use too, though I have seen some other reviewers talk about data overload, and that deep down, the results you get are a little messy.

True – it can get a little messy if your data mining is too broad. But if you really focus on the types of links you are looking for – once you export that data to excel and have a play with some filters, you can really dig up a lot of opportunities.

If you are wise enough to know that you need links, **Link Prospector is just about the best tool out there for helping you identify more places to get these links.**

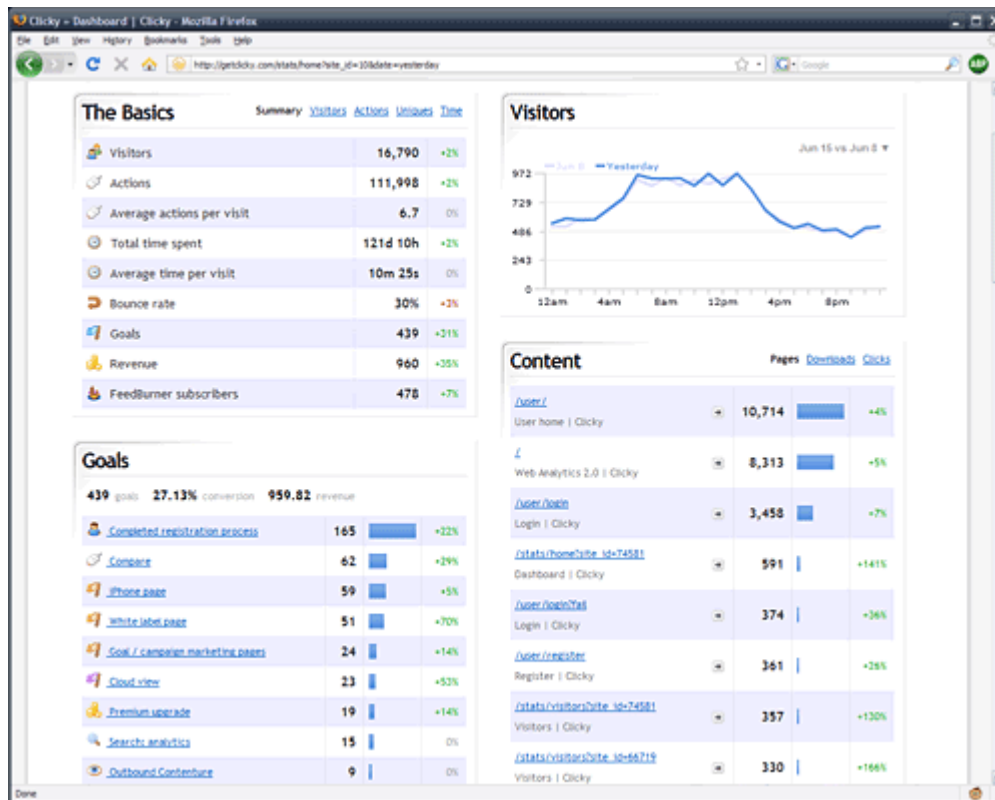
TIP – In a post penguin world, its online marketing *ideas* you are looking for. You do not want to be using the exact same methods as everybody else. You can use Majestic SEO to get a handle on why the top competition ranks where it does. If you take some of those ideas to Link Prospector and look for more of those types of link opportunities, it can deliver some really good opportunities.

Highly Recommended – Link Prospector is a great tool for finding where you can get links. If you are serious about link building, you are crazy not to give this tool a go. Enough said.

*Link Prospector also has some great support tools!

Analytics Packages

Clicky



Google Analytics is the de facto analytics software, and the only tool for checking lots of data – but I find I log into my [Clicky](#) account more than I do GA these days – if all I want is a quick and dirty analysis of a page or keyword. Brilliant tool.

When I find a simple tool I like I usually stick with it forever. I'm amazed at the simple things [Clicky](#) (AFF*) does so effortlessly. The control panel seems so much more intuitive than for instance Google Analytics. Instantly accessible.

I tried a few real time web stats analytics packages out (I like software with a free trial) and I must say, Clicky is brilliant.

1. See who is on your site AT THAT VERY MOMENT
2. See where traffic is coming from AND track outbound visitors too
3. See your valuable incoming links in action
4. See a MORE ACCURATE bounce rate for your pages
5. Too much good stuff to mention

...and best of all, **Clicky might very well be FREE if you don't have more than 3,000 page impressions a day** – ideal for small businesses.

They even give you an easy affiliate link to promote the software if you like it – which I very much do (so I am using that affiliate link).

Telling you. Try [Clicky PRO out FREE](#). (AFF*) Excellent analytics, and easy to install too.

Rank Tracker Software

Pro Rank Tracker

[ProRankTracker](#) is a simple, easy to use and accurate cloud-based rank checker suitable for most needs.

I use it daily – and I am signed up for the API.

Advanced Web Ranking



I've tried a lot of ways to **check rankings in search engines** over the years and generally speaking I've been disappointed with most if not all of them.

[Advanced Web Ranking](#) (aff) is one of the best.

So much so, that we've resorted for many clients to manually checking them / and or developing our own tools to ensure the results we get are what the customer is seeing too. The problem with this type of rankings check is how much time it consumes in the studio. The problem with a lot of automatic website rank checkers, of course is that they could well be software packages that violate Google webmaster guidelines for instance.

It automatically runs a ranking report checking keyword positions in Google, and automatically sends me a keyword rank check report via email with details of each keyword position (and over time, this generates a cool graph of ranking activity).

It's a pretty comprehensive tool and it certainly seems to perform very well, with a good support forum too to ask any questions.

A very neat feature if you run one site is the sheer number of search engines you can track your rankings on too (thousands of them from what I can see) – not that I bother with search engine submission at all these days of course.

The keyword position reports too are quite comprehensive and you can run as many search engine ranking reports and projects (multiple websites and rank checks) as you wish.

It's fairly intuitive and easy to set up and use after you play about with it.

The software also can check your [Pagerank](#) and *Alexa* traffic stats too (if either of those metrics are important to you) and can keep an eye on competitors rankings too.

If you want to trial it free for 30 days, you can [download it here](#). It's available for Mac & PC and is desktop based.

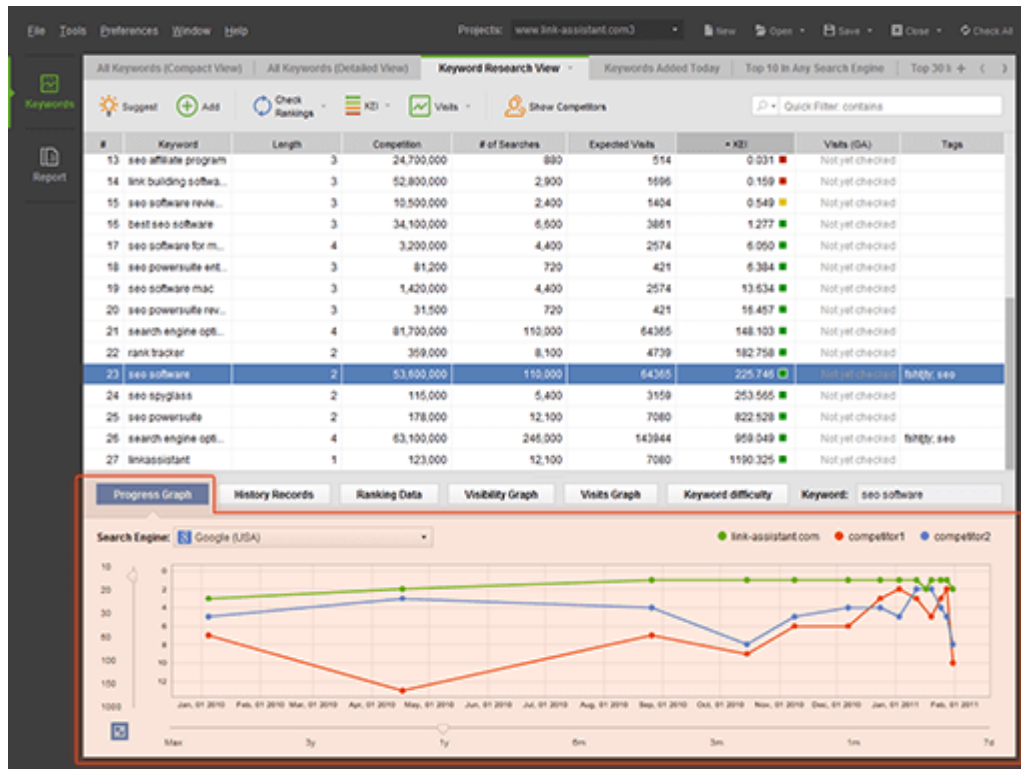
Note – I'm still not that obsessed with individual keyword rankings – I'm much more interested in creating good content on a site and acquiring backlinks as naturally as possible to build domain trust – and then [unlocking that domain authority](#) by publishing even more content, but in competitive sectors where the linkerati seem to be thin on the ground, for specific keyword phrases, link building is still a must of course.

I've been testing out the rank check tool AWR Website Ranking on a small personal site (after being advised it does not break Google's guidelines – although, if you go by the letter of the law, I wonder if that is wishful thinking, by ALL rank checker tool providers):

First of all, I would like to put one thing aside. There is no way that Google or any other search engine can ban you for using our software, And this is because for Google, AWR looks like a regular web browser. We send the EXACT data web browsers send. There is no way for Google to find out that you are using a tool like AWR., And even if they knew, they have no way of knowing your website domain. AWR sends queries that only contain the Keywords, NOT the URL. It then searches the URLs in the results Google sent back. This means they have no way of making a connection between the IP address of your computer, where AWR runs from, and your website. If this was possible, then I could fake this information to look like my competitor domain and then get him banned!

It works as expected, and played nice with my Mac Book Pro.

Link Assistant Rank Tracker Software



I purchased a copy of [SEO Powersuite](#) (AFF*) to have a play about with and for review purposes, and I like it. I reviewed its stable mate [Website Auditor](#) above, which is bundled with [Rank Tracker](#) (AFF*) in SEO Powersuite, and I like that too.

- Limitless keyword tracking: you can track rankings in over 590 search engines with no keyword or domain limits
- Auto-pilot tracking: set the tracking tool once and run rank checks automatically for set dates and time
- Historical rank tracking: every time you check your rankings, Rank Tracker charts the all ranking changes for each individual keyword and your site's overall SERP visibility

Rank Tracker is pretty simple to set up, and as accurate as it can be, when checking your websites search engine rankings for multiple keywords, on multiple engines.

Use:

- pick a website
- pick your search engines you want to monitor, and
- tell it which keywords you want to track
- find out the number of searches and competition for a particular keyword or phrase

- schedule it to check for keywords at any set time of the day
- schedule reports to print or export to web, pdf or csv etc

It can also check the competition for the key terms and track your competition if you are interested in that.

You can schedule when it checks your rankings, and you can schedule reports to publish when you want, too.

It tracks everything about your keyword so you can see its performance over time. You can get a [FREE TRIAL DOWNLOAD](#) (AFF*)(Zip File!) to play about with it too.

It looks ideal for small businesses to track rankings if you prefer a piece of software you run on your pc or mac rather than a hosted solution.

Spreadsheets, Browsers & Other Tools



I have spent a lot of my time in Excel spreadsheets, more so in the last few years. Google Spreadsheets are cool too.... but with too many limitations for me to make it a daily tool. Excel lets you automate just about everything – and I do these days.

There's nothing more satisfying than taking 30 days work and automating it. You can manage entire sites with an excel spreadsheet – and if you're not on some level, you're missing out big time.

Excel Tools For SEO Plugin

If you're not running your own functions with Excel – [Excel Tools For SEO](#) is a great place to start. This is a fantastic tool set – once you start with this stuff you can't live without it. Great for combining Adwords data with page specific data and looking for opportunities like under-optimised page titles etc. Tip – Get a Google Adwords API.



Chrome Extensions – I don't really like third-party toolbars – but I do have the odd plugin installed. [Chrome Notepad](#) is a free tool for Chrome browser – ideal for taking quick notes –

and FREE. I also have [SEO For Chrome](#) installed – good for a quick glance at things and it highlights nofollow links on the fly, which I find useful.

I capture screenshots day-to-day and I use this free Google CHROME Add-On called [Awesome Screenshot Minus](#).

On my Mac to take a picture of, for instance, small parts of a screen – I normally use the keyword command **Command-Shift-4** (I don't know how PC users do it) but where this software comes in useful is if I want to **take a picture of an entire web page that is too big to fit in your browser window**.

Other Popular SEO Tools – [SEObook](#), [Moz](#) & [Raven](#) have good online offerings these days – some more aimed at reporting to clients. While I do have accounts for all, neither is something I visit daily. I have found tools from these sites to be VERY useful on the ODD occasion though – and I know some people swear by them.

I suppose it depends on what you're employed to do, which should influence which tools you invest in.

Dropbox

No wonder Steve Jobs tried to buy it. Dropbox is genius – having a folder you can EASILY share with everybody in work or between computers is essential for us these days. Dropbox is FREE and you can get more space by sharing links like these – Try [Dropbox](#).

SEO Powersuite (LinkAssistant.com)



[SEO Powersuite](#) is definitely one of the best all in one desktop SEO packages available for Mac and PC. Check your rankings, your competitors, backlinks and crawl your website. It's a great tool for beginners. Check here for discounts on [SEO Powersuite](#).

I use this tool set to have a poke around but my favourite out of the tools is [Rank Tracker](#) to run quick ranking audits which comes on its own, or with SEO Powersuite.

Hidemyass

If you are using a desktop rank tracker or any other rank tracker software you'll need a VPN/Proxy. This thing is so easy even I got it working.

You can set up one computer to run ranking queries via rotating proxies (every few minutes or so) via [hidemyass](#) and save the results to a Dropbox folder to look at it when necessary (from another machine). I would also recommend you sign up with [LOGMEIN](#) – so you can remotely sign into the rank checker computer in case you need to restart the application. Also good for visiting sites you don't want tracking you, or incognito scraping (hat tip to [Scrapebox](#) BTW).

I don't use it for soul destroying nefarious purposes like spamming or anything like that but lots probably do.

[Google Webmaster Tools](#) and [Bing Webmaster tools](#) can provide useful insight to your site, but I only really look into these when I am digging deep, or looking for links I am not getting the benefit from.

Beware

There are a lot of tools out there that are a total waste of your time, and some are an out and out scam I've had direct experience with all the tools I have reviewed here, and over a decades experience in search engine marketing.

If you are thinking of buying any software, remember, there are little 'cheats' these days in SEO for the beginners – a good tool with only give you work to do.

Keep in mind:

- Competitor Backlink tools can give you ideas where and how to get links but remember you don't need the same links as your competitors, you just need, well, credible links from reputable websites
- [Keyword density](#) is not something you should be focusing on at all if you are writing your articles after doing some basic keyword research.
- Page relevance tools – whatever they might key off of, it's probably not what Google is. It's incredibly important to create a semantic and contextually relevant page but you just need a keyword tool (again, probably pretty inaccurate at least when it comes to the numbers)
- Search engine webmaster tools – I use them for identifying if a search engine has any difficulty accessing particular content on a site, and some backlink analysis
- If you have a WordPress blog (you should be using the [WordPress SEO](#) plugin).

The tools I use most often are Majestic SEO (for historic link reports at the beginning of a project), SEMRush for quick keyword research, Advanced Web Ranking or Pro-Ranktracker for checking rankings on a few sites, Clicky for real-time website stats, Google Analytics for quick traffic analysis. I also use a couple of different tools for spidering a site and checking syntax.

Rich, accessible, relevant content and editorial links from reputable sites are what you need to get more visitors safely from Google in 2016.

You should be thinking things like *'how am I going to make my site better'*, or *'how am I going to keep people on my site longer'*, or and *'just where is my next quality link coming from'*?

Analysis paralysis is pretty common with any tool set, so watch out, and good luck.

If I time, I will add the rest one day!

NOTE – I've used affiliate links for some of the tools in this post. If I really like something I usually get an affiliate account (that means if you were to buy it, I would get a commission). I have also nofollowed all links on this page to external sites to basically comply with search engines easily.