How to Judge the Value of a Keyword

Every search phrase that's typed into an engine is recorded in one way or another: and keyword research tools like those described below allow us to retrieve this information. However, those tools cannot show us (directly) how valuable or important it might be to rank for and receive traffic from those search. To understand the value of a keyword, we need to research further, make some hypotheses, test, and iterate — the classic web marketing formula.

The following is a basic, but valuable process for determining a keyword's value:

Ask yourself
Is the keyword relevant to the content your website offers? Will searchers who find your site through this term find the likely answer to their implied question(s)? And will this traffic result in financial rewards (or other organizational goals) directly or indirectly? If the answer to all of these questions is a clear "Yes," proceed...

Search for the term/phrase in the major engines
Are there search advertisements running along the top and right-hand side of the organic results? Typically, many search ads mean a high value keyword, and multiple search ads above the organic results often means a highly lucrative and directly conversion-prone keyword.

Buy a sample campaign for the keyword at Google AdWords and/or Bing Adcenter
In Google AdWords, choose "exact match" and point the traffic to the most relevant page on your website. Measure the traffic to your site, and track impressions and conversion rate over the course of at least 2-300 clicks (this may take only a day or two with highly trafficked terms, or several weeks with keyword in lesser demand).

Using the data you've collected, make an educated guess about the value of a single visitor to your site with the given search term or phrase.
For example, if, in the past 24 hours, your search ad has generated 5,000 impressions, of which 100 visitors have come to your site and 3 have converted for total profit (not revenue!) of $300, then a single visitor for that keyword is worth approx. $3 to your business. Those 5,000 impressions in 24 hours could probably generate a click-through rate of between 30-40% with a #1 ranking (see the locked AOL data mining for more on potential click-through-rates), which would mean 1500-2000 visits per day, at $3 each, or ~$1.75 million dollars per year. No wonder businesses love search marketing!

Of course, even the best estimates of value fall flat against the hands-on process of optimizing and calculating ROI. Remember that the time and money you invest in a search marketing campaign must be weighed against any returns, and even though SEO is typically one of the highest return marketing investments, measuring success is still critical to the process.
Understanding the Long Tail of Keyword Demand

It's wonderful to deal with keywords that have 5,000 searches a day, or even 500 searches a day, but in reality, these "popular" search terms actually make up less than 20% of the overall searches performed on the web. The remaining 80% lie in what's commonly called the "long tail" of search. The long tail contains hundreds of millions of unique searches that might be conducted a few times in any given day (or even only once, ever!), but, when taken together, they comprise the majority of the world's demand for information through search engines.

Understanding the search demand curve is critical, because it stresses the importance of "long-tail" targeted content - pages with information not directed at any particular single, popular query, but rather simply exposing the myriad of human thought, research, and opinion to the spiders of the search engines. As an example, below we've included a sample keyword demand curve, illustrating the small number of queries sending larger amounts of traffic alongside the plethora of rarely-searched terms and phrases that bring the bulk of our search referrals.

"Ignore the long tail at your peril - search marketing and web site content strategies must allow for this "impossible to predict" form of visits or risk losing out to a more expository and prolific competitor."

Keyword Research

**Resources**

Where do we get all of this knowledge about keyword demand and keyword referrals? From research sources like these listed here.

- **Google Adwords' Keyword Estimator**
- **Google Insights for Search**
- **Google Trends Keyword Demand Prediction**
- **Microsoft AdCenter Keyword Forecasting**
- **Wordtracker's Free Basic Keyword Demand**

We can see that Google is predicting both the cost of running campaigns for these terms as well as estimates of the number of clicks a campaign might receive. You can use these latter numbers (under the "estimated clicks/day" column) to get a rough idea of how popular a particular keyword or phrase is in comparison to another.
Keyword Difficulty

I've got a lock on a bogey!

In order to know which keywords to target now (and which to pursue later), it's essential to not only understand the demand for a given term or phrase, but the work required to achieve those rankings. If mighty competitors block the top 10 results and you're just starting out on the web, the uphill battle for rankings can take months or years of effort bearing little to no fruit. This is why it's essential to understand keyword difficulty.

Of course, if you'd like to save time, SEOmoz's own Keyword Difficulty Tool does a good job collecting all of these metrics and providing a comparative score for any given search term or phrase.

CHAPTER SIX

HOW USABILITY, USER EXPERIENCE & CONTENT AFFECT SEARCH ENGINE RANKINGS

The search engines are in a constant quest to improve their results by providing the "best" possible results. While "best" is subjective, the engines have a very good idea of the kinds of pages and sites that satisfy their searchers. Generally, these sites have several traits in common:

1. Easy to use, navigate, and understand.
2. Provide direct, actionable information relevant to the query.
3. Professionally designed and accessible to modern browsers.
4. Deliver high quality, legitimate, credible content.
Search engines can’t understand text, view images, or watch video the same way a human being can, and thus they rely on meta information (not necessary meta tags) about sites and pages in order to rank content. The engines discovered early on that the link structure of the web could serve as a proxy for votes and popularity – higher quality sites and information earned more links than their less useful, lower quality peers. Today, link analysis algorithms have advanced considerably, but these principles hold true.

All of that positive attention and excitement around the content offered by the new site translates into a machine parseable (and algorithmically valuable) collection of links. The titling, source, anchor text, and number of links to the new site are all factored into its potential performance (i.e., ranking) for relevant queries at the engines.

Now imagine that site wasn’t so great – let’s say it’s just an ordinary site without anything unique or impressive.

The Impact of Usability and User Experience on Search Engine Rankings

There are a limited number of variables that search engines can take into account directly, including keyword placement, links, and site structure. However, through linking patterns, the engines make a considerable number of intuitions about a given site. Usability and user experience are "second order" influences on search engine ranking success. They provide an indirect, but measurable benefit to a site's external popularity, which the engines can then interpret as a signal of higher quality. This is called the "no one likes to link to a crummy site" phenomenon.

"Yeah, I dabble..."

"Dooood, I just got's me some Adobe CS4 with extra filters!!"

Crafting a thoughtful, empathetic user experience can ensure that your site is perceived positively by those who visit, encouraging sharing, bookmarking, return visits and links – signals that trickle down to the search engines and contribute to high rankings.
Crafting Content

for Search Engine Success

Developing "great content" may be the most oft-repeated suggestion in the SEO world. Yet, despite its clichéd status, appealing, useful content is critical to search engine optimization. Every search performed at the engines comes with an intent – to find, learn, solve, buy, fix, treat, or understand. Search engines place web pages in their results in order to satisfy that intent in the best possible way, and crafting the most fulfilling, thorough content that addresses a searcher's needs provides an excellent chance to earn top rankings.

Search Intent Flavors

Search intent comes in a variety of flavors...

Navigational Searches
Visiting a pre-determined destination and sourcing the "correct" website URL.

Navigational searches are performed with the intent of surfing directly to a specific website. In some cases, the user may not know the exact URL, and the search engine serves as the "White Pages," passing along the (hopefully) correct location.

Informational Searches
Researching non-transactional information, getting quick answers, and ego-searching.

Informational searches involve a huge range of queries from finding out the local weather, getting a map and directions, to finding the name of Tony Stark's military buddy from the Iron Man movie or checking on just how long that trip to Mars really takes. The common thread here is that the searches are primarily non-commercial and non-transaction-oriented in nature, the information itself is the goal, and no interaction beyond clicking and reading is required.

Commercial Investigation
Researching sources for a story, uncovering potential clients/partners, acquiring competitive intelligence, discovering options for future transactions.

A commercial investigation search straddles the line between pure research and commercial intent. For example, sourcing potential partners for distribution of your new t-shirts in Albuquerque, determining what companies make laptop bags for use in the United Kingdom, or researching the best brand of digital cameras for an upcoming purchase all qualify. They're not directly transactional, and may never result in an exchange of goods, services, or monies, but they're not purely informational either.
TRANSACTIONAL SEARCHES
Identifying a local business, making a purchase online, and completing a task.

Transactional searches don't necessarily involve a credit card or wire transfer. Signing up for a free trial account at Cook's Illustrated, creating a Gmail account, or finding the best local Mexican cuisine (in Seattle it's Carta de Oaxaca) are all transactional queries.

Fulfilling these intents is up to you — Creativity, high quality writing, use of examples, images, and multimedia all help in crafting content that perfectly fits with a searcher's goals. Your reward is satisfied searchers who find their queries fulfilled and reward that positive experience through activity on your site or with links to it.

CHAPTER SEVEN
GROWING POPULARITY & LINKS

For search engines that crawl the web, links are the streets between pages. Using link analysis, the engines can discover how pages are related to other pages and in what ways. Since the late 1990's links have also served as a stand-in for votes — representing the democracy of the web's opinion about what pages are important and popular. (Some refer to this as the reasonable surfer model). The engines themselves have refined the use of link data to a fine art, and incredibly sophisticated algorithms create nuanced evaluations of site and pages based on this information.

Professional SEOs attribute a considerable portion of the search engines' algorithms to link-based factors (see Search Engine Ranking Factors). Through links, engines analyze the popularity of a site & page based on the number and popularity of pages linking to them, as well as metrics like trust, spam, & authority. Trustworthy sites tend to link to other trusted sites, while spammy sites receive very few links from trusted sources (see mozTrust). Authority models, like those postulated in the Hillel Algorithm, suggest that links are a very good way of identifying expert documents in a given space.
Thanks to this focus on algorithmic use and analysis of links, growing the link profile of a website is critical to gaining traction, attention, and traffic from the engines. As an SEO, link building is among the top tasks required for search ranking and traffic success.

**Link Signals**

*used by search engines*

Before embarking on a link building effort, it's critical to understand the elements of a link used by the search engines as well as how those elements factor into the weighting of links in the algorithms. We don't know all the attributes measured by the engines, but through analysis of patent applications, papers submitted to information retrieval conferences, and hands-on experience & testing, we can draw some intelligent assumptions. Below is a list of notable factors worthy of consideration. All of these issues, and many more, are considered by professional SEOs when measuring link value and a site's link profile.

**Global Popularity**

The more popular and important a site is, the more links from that site matter to the search engines. Getting lots of local, topic-specific links is great, too, but to earn trust and authority with the engines, you'll need the help of some powerful link partners.

**Local/Topic-Specific Popularity**

The concept of "local" popularity (first pioneered by the Teoma search engine) suggests that links from sites within a topic-specific community matter more than links from general or off-topic sites.

**Anchor Text**

One of the strongest signals the engines use in rankings is anchor text. If dozens of links point to a page with the right keywords, that page has a very good probability of ranking well for the targeted phrase in that anchor text. You can see examples of this in action with searches like "click here" and "leave," where many results rank solely due to the anchor text of inbound links.

**TrustRank**

In order to weed out massive amounts of spam (some estimate as much as 60% of the web's pages are spam), search engines use systems for measuring trust, many of which are based on the link graph. Earning links from highly trusted domains can, thus, result in a significant boost to this scoring metric.

**Link Neighborhood**

In many papers on spam detection and information retrieval, using the sites that link to a domain as well as the sites that domain links to has an impressive knack for spam detection and filtering. That's wise to choose those sites you link to carefully and be equally selective with the sites you attempt to earn links from.
Link Building Basics

Building links is an art. It's almost certainly the most challenging part of an SEO's job, and, for many sites, the one most critical to achieving long term success. Many companies can afford to hire SEOs to help make their websites search friendly and search optimized, but a robust backlink profile is an extremely high barrier to competition.

1. Editorial Accumulation
   Links that are given naturally by sites and pages that want to reference your content or company. These links require no specific action from the SEO, other than the creation of citation-worthy material and the ability to create awareness about it to relevant communities.

2. Manual Suggestion & Approval
   Emailing bloggers with links, submitting sites to directories, or paying for listings of any kind fit into this group. The SEO must create a value proposition with the link target and complete that transaction manually (whether it be filling out forms for submissions to a website award program or convincing a professor that your resource is worthy of inclusion on the public syllabus).

3. Self-Created, Non-Editorial
   Hundreds of thousands of websites offer any visitor the opportunity to create links through guestbook signings, forum signatures, blog comments, or user profiles. These links are typically quite low in value, but can, in aggregate, have a significant impact. However, automatic methods of generating these links is certainly spamming, and even the manual creation of such links is frowned upon by many site owners and search engines. Exceptions abound, and for those sites that offer these options and don't use the rel="nofollow" attribute on outbound links, there can be opportunity.

It's up to you, as an SEO, to select which of these will have the highest return on the effort invested. As a general rule, it's wise to build as vast and varied a link profile as possible, as this brings the best search engine results.

Any link building pattern that appears non-standard, unnatural, or manipulative will eventually become a target for advancing search algorithms to discount.

STARTING

a Link Building Campaign

As with any marketing activity, the first process undertaken in a link building campaign must be the creation of goals and strategies. Sadly, link building is one of the most difficult activities to measure, particularly from a search engine optimization perspective. Although the engines internally weight each link with precise, mathematical metrics, it's impossible for those outside of the engineering teams at these companies to extract this data. Thus, as SEOs, we rely on a number of signals to help build a rating scale of link value. Along with the less-measurable data from the link signals mentioned above, these metrics include the following:
Page Ranking for Relevant Search Terms

One of the best ways to determine how well a search engine values a given page is to search for some of the keywords and phrases that page targets (particularly those in the title tag and headline). Pages that rank well for relevant queries tend to be more valuable than those that don’t.

Google PageRank

Despite much malging over the years for accuracy and freshness problems (Google only updates their toolbar PageRank data every 3-5 months and sometimes manipulates the values intentionally to discourage spam and over-analysis), there is still value to looking at the number reported. This is discussed more in this blog post on PageRank Correlation. Pages with high PageRank do tend to pass on more link value than those with little or none. Be careful with those that have PageRank “unranked” (a gray bar) as these may be highly valuable pages that simply haven’t received visible PageRank since the last update.

SEObot moxRank

moxRank (mR) shows how popular a given web page is on the web. Pages with high moxRank (popular) scores tend to rank better. More links to a given page, the more popular it becomes. Links from important pages (like www.cnn.com or www.irs.gov) increase a page’s popularity, and subsequently its moxRank, more than unimportant websites.

A web page’s moxRank can be improved by getting lots of links from semi-popular pages or a few links from very popular pages.

SEOmox Domain Authority

Domain authority (or DA) is a query independent measure of how likely a domain is likely to rank for any given query. It is calculated by analyzing the Internet’s domain graph and comparing it to tens of thousands of queries in Google.

Google blogsearch

Google Blog Search is the only property controlled by the search giant that offers accurate backlink information. While this only shows links from blogs and feeds, there’s still great value in seeing which sites/pages have earned authority and attention in the blogosphere, as this can be a useful predictor of the link value they’ll pass.

Yahoo! Site Explorer Reported Inlinks

Yahoo! Site Explorer is a valuable tool for seeing the links that point to a given site or page. Using this tool, you can make estimates about the relative link popularity and importance a page has based on who links to it. Typically those pages/sites with more powerful and important links will pass on greater value through their links.

Number of Links on a Page

According to the original PageRank formula, the value that a link passes is diluted by the presence of other links on a page. Thus, getting linked-to by a page with few links is better than being linked-to by the same page with many links on it (all other things being equal). The degree to which this is relevant is unknowable (and in our testing, it appears to be important, but not overwhelmingly so), but it’s certainly something to be aware of as you conduct link acquisition.

Potential Referral Traffic

Link building should never be solely about search engines. Links that send high amounts of direct click-through traffic not only tend to provide better search engine value for rankings, but also send targeted, valuable visitors to your site (the basic goal of all Internet marketing). This is something you can estimate based on the numbers of visits/page views according to site stats, but if you can’t get access to these, services like Compete, Alexa, & Alexa can give you a rough idea of at least domain-wide traffic, from which you can estimate page-specific popularity.

It takes time, practice, and experience to build comfort with these variables as they relate to search engine traffic. However, using your website’s analytics, you should be able to determine whether your campaign is successful. Increases in search traffic when accompanied by more frequent search engine crawling and increases in referring link traffic correlates with a well-managed, intelligently structured campaign. If you see traffic from engines like Bing and Yahoo! are rising while Google stays constant, it’s possible that you need to seek more authoritative, better trusted links (as Google is the most “picky” of the engines when it comes to link evaluation).
5 Samples of Link Building Strategies

Many sites offer directories or listings of relevant resources

* You can find hundreds of these on SEOmoz’s Directory List or use the search engines themselves to find lists of pages that offer outbound links in this fashion (for example, try searching for allintitle: resources directory at Google and notice the millions of results).

Get your customers to link to you

* If you have partners you work with regularly or loyal customers that love your brand, you can use this to your advantage by sending out partnership badges – graphic icons that link back to your site (like Microsoft often does with their partner certification program). Just as you’d get customers wearing your t-shirts or sporting your bumper stickers, links are the best way to accomplish the same feat on the web. Check out this post on link requests in order confirmation emails for more.

Build a company blog and make it a valuable, informative and entertaining resource

* This content and link building strategy is so popular and valuable that it’s one of the few recommended personally by the engineers at Google (source: USA Today & Stone Temple). Blogs have the unique ability to contribute fresh material on a consistent basis, participate in conversations across the web, and earn listings and links from other blogs, including blogs and blog directories.

Create content that inspires viral sharing and natural linking

* In the SEO world, we often call this “linkbait.” Good examples might include this [Peek Season Ingredient Map from Epicurious](https://www.epicurious.com/), this [Interactive Graphic Explaining Hand Signals Used on Stock Market Trading Floors from the New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/), or this [Video of an iPod in a Blender from Blendeer](https://www.blendeer.com/). Each leverages aspects of usefulness, information dissemination, or humor to create a viral effect – users who see it once want to share it with friends, and bloggers/tech-savvy webmasters who see it will often do so through links. High quality, editorially endorsed votes are invaluable to building trust, authority, and rankings potential.

Build content that can be shared through a citation-based licensing agreement

* If you have photos, videos, graphics, charts, raw data, or test content that can be licensed out with a system like Creative Commons’ Attribution (or Attribution-ShareAlike), you can leverage the power of the web’s penchant for information sharing while retaining links back to your original and your site each time someone uses your material.

Show Me the Money

An Aside on Buying Links

Google, Yahoo, and Bing all seek to discount the influence of paid links on their search results. While it is impossible for them to detect and discredit all paid links, the search engines put a lot of time and resources into finding ways to detect those. This includes sending anonymous representatives to search conferences and joining link networks so they can see who else is involved.

As such, we at SEOmoz recommend spending your time on long term link building strategies that focus on building links naturally. You can read more about this at [this blog post](https://www.seomoz.org/).
To encourage webmasters to create sites and content in accessible ways, each of the major search engines have built support and guidance-focused services. Each provides varying levels of value to search marketers, but all of them are worthy of understanding. These tools provide data points and opportunities for exchanging information with the engines that are not provided anywhere else.

The sections below explain the common interactive elements that each of the major search engines support and identify why they are useful. There are enough details on each of these elements to warrant their own articles, but for the purposes of this guide, only the most crucial and valuable components will be discussed.

**Common Search Engine Protocols**

### 1. SITEMAPS

Sitemaps are a tool that enable you to give hints to the search engines on how they can crawl your website. You can read the full details of the protocols at [Sitemaps.org](http://Sitemaps.org). In addition, you can build your own sitemaps at [XML Sitemaps.com](http://XML Sitemaps.com). Sitemaps come in three varieties.

**XML**

**Extensible Markup Language (Recommended Format)**

- **Pros**
  This is the most widely accepted format for sitemaps. It is extremely easy for search engines to parse and can be produced by a plethora of sitemap generators. Additionally, it allows for the most granular control of page parameters.

- **Cons**
  Relatively large file sizes. Since XML requires an opening and a closing tag around each element, files sizes can get very large.

**RSS**

**Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary**

- **Pros**
  Easy to maintain. RSS sitemaps can easily be coded to automatically update when new content is added.

- **Cons**
  Harder to manage. Although RSS is a dialect of XML, it is actually much harder to manage due to its updating properties.

**TXT**

**Text File**

- **Pros**
  Extremely easy. The text sitemap format is one URL per line up to 50,000 lines.

- **Cons**
  Does not provide the ability to add meta data to pages.
2. ROBOTS.TXT

The robots.txt file (a product of the Robots Exclusion Protocol) should be stored in a website's root directory (e.g., www.google.com/robots.txt). The file serves as an access guide for automated visitors (web robots). By using robots.txt, webmasters can indicate which areas of a site they would like to disallow bots from crawling as well as indicate the locations of sitemaps files (discussed below) and crawl-delay parameters. You can read more details about this at the robots.txt Knowledge Center page.

The following commands are available:

Disallow
Prevents compliant robots from accessing specific pages or folders.

Sitemap
Indicates the location of a website's sitemap or sitemaps.

Crawl Delay
Indicates the speed (in milliseconds) at which a robot can crawl a server.

An Example of Robots.txt

```
User-agent: *
Disallow: /sitemap.xml
```

Warning: It is very important to realize that not all web robots follow robots.txt. People with bad intentions (e.g., e-mail address scrapers) build bots that don't follow this protocol and in extreme cases can use it to identify the location of private information. For this reason, it is recommended that the location of administration sections and other private sections of publicly accessible websites not be included in the robots.txt. Instead, these pages can utilize the meta robots tag (discussed next) to keep the major search engines from indexing their high-risk content.
3. META ROBOTS

The meta robots tag creates page-level instructions for search engine bots.

The meta robots tag should be included in the head section of the HTML document:

```
An Example of Meta Robots
<html>
<head>
<title>The Best Webpage on the Internet</title>
<meta name="ROBOT NAME" content="ARGUMENTS" />
</head>
<body>
<h1>Hello World</h1>
</body>
</html>
```

In the example above, "ROBOT NAME" is the user-agent of a specific web robot (ex. Googlebot) or an asterisk to identify all robots, and "ARGUMENTS" is one arguments listed in the diagram to the right.

4. REL="nofollow"

The rel=nofollow attribute creates link-level instructions for search engine bots that suggest how the given link should be treated. While search engines claim to not follow links, tests show that they actually do follow them for discovery new pages. These links certainly pass less juice (and in most cases no juice) than their non-nofollowed counterparts and are thus still recommended for SEO purposes.

```
An Example of nofollow

<a href="http://www.example.com" title="Example" rel="nofollow">Example Link</a>
```

In the example above, the value of the link would not be passed to example.com as the rel=nofollow attribute has been added.

---

Search Engine Tools

GOOGLE WEBMASTERS TOOLS

Google Webmasters Tools

Settings

Geographic Target - If a given site targets users in a particular location, webmasters can provide Google with information that will help determine how that site appears in our country-specific search results, and also improve Google search results for geographic queries.

Preferred Domain - The preferred domain is the one that a webmaster would like used to index their site's pages. If a webmaster
specifies a preferred domain as http://www.example.com and Google finds a link to that site that is formatted as http://example.com, Google will treat that link as if it were pointing at http://www.example.com.

Image Search — If a webmaster chooses to opt in to enhanced image search, Google may use tools such as Google Image Labeler to associate the images included in their site with labels that will improve indexing and search quality of those images.

Crawl Rate — The crawl rate affects the speed of Googlebot's requests during the crawl process. It has no effect on how often Googlebot crawls a given site. Google determines the recommended rate based on the number of pages on a website.

Diagnostics

Web Crawl — Web Crawl identifies problems Googlebot encountered when it crawls a given website. Specifically, it lists Sitemap errors, HTTP errors, nofollowed URLs, URLs restricted by robots.txt and URLs that time out.

Mobile Crawl — Identifies problems with mobile versions of websites.

Content Analysis — This analysis identifies search engine unfriendly HTML elements. Specifically, it lists meta description issues, title tag issues and non-inducible content issues.

Statistics

These statistics are a window into how Google sees a given website. Specifically, it identifies top search queries, crawl stats, subscriber stats, "What Googlebot sees" and Index stats.

Link Data

This section provides details on links. Specifically, it outlines external links, internal links and sitelinks. Sitelinks are section links that sometimes appear under websites when they are especially applicable to a given query.

Sitemaps

This is the interface for submitting and managing sitemaps directly with Google.

YAHOO! SITE EXPLORER

Yahoo! Site Explorer

Features

Statistics — These statistics are very basic and include data like the title tag of a homepage and a number of indexed pages for the given site.

Feeds — This interface provides a way to directly submit feeds to Yahoo! for inclusion into its index. This is mostly useful for websites with frequently updated blogs.

Actions — This simplistic interface allows webmasters to delete URLs from Yahoo!'s index and to specify dynamic URLs. The latter is especially important because Yahoo! traditionally has a lot of difficulty differentiating dynamic URLs.

BING WEBMASTER CENTER

Bing Webmaster Center

Features

Profile — This interface provides a way for webmasters to specify the location of sitemaps and a form to provide contact information so Bing can contact them if it encounters problems with crawling their website.

Crawl Issues — This helpful section identifies HTTP status code errors, Robots.txt problems, Bing-dynamic URLs, unsupported content type and, most importantly, pages infected with malware.

Backlinks — This section allows webmasters to find out which webpages (including their own) are linking to a given website.

Outbound Links — Similarly to the aforementioned section, this interface allows webmasters to view all outbound pages on a given webpage.

Keywords — This section allows webmasters to discover which of their webpages are deemed relevant to specific queries.

Sitemaps — This is the interface for submitting and managing sitemaps directly to Microsoft.
SEO Moz Open Site Explorer

While not run by the search engines, SEO Moz’s Open Site Explorer does provide similar data.

Features

Identify Powerful Links – Open Site Explorer sorts all of your inbound links by their metrics that help you determine which links are most important.

Find the Strongest Linking Domains – This tool shows you the strongest domains linking to your domain.

Analyze Link Anchor Text Distribution – Open Site Explorer show you the distribution of the text people used when linking to you.

Head to Head Comparison View – This feature allows you to compare two websites to see why one is outranking the other.

For more information, click below:

Learn More

It is a relatively recent occurrence that search engines have started to provide tools that allow webmasters to interact with their search results. This is a big step forward in SEO and the webmaster/Search Engine relationship. That said, the engines can only go so far with helping webmasters. It is true today, and will likely be true in the future that the ultimate responsibility of SEO is on the marketers and webmasters. It is for this reason that learning SEO is so important.

Chapter Nine

Myths & Misconceptions About Search Engines

Unfortunately, over the past 12 years, a great number of misconceptions have emerged about how the search engines operate and what’s required to perform effectively. In this section, we’ll cover the most common of these, and explain the real story behind the myths.
SEARCH ENGINE SUBMISSION

In classical SEO times (the late 1990’s), search engines had “submission” forms that were part of the optimization process. Webmasters & site owners would fill out their site & pages with information (this would sometimes even include the keywords they wanted to rank for), and “submit” them to the engines, after which a bot would crawl and index those resources in their index. For obvious reasons (manipulation, reliance on submitters, etc.), this practice was unsustainable and eventually gave way to purely crawl-based engines. Since 2001, search engine submission has not only been required, but is actually virtually useless. The engines have all publicly noted that they rarely use the “submission” URL lists, and that the best practice is to earn links from other sites, as this will expose the engines to your content naturally.

You can still see submission pages (for Yahoo!, Google, Bing), but these are remnants of time long past, and are essentially useless to the practice of modern SEO. If you hear a pitch from an SEO offering “search engine submission” services, run, don’t walk to a real SEO. Even if the engines did use the submission service to crawl your site, you’d be very unlikely to earn enough “link juice” to be included in their indices or rank competitively for search queries.

META TAGS

Once upon a time, much like search engine submission, meta tags (in particular, the meta keywords tag) were an important part of the SEO process. You would include the keywords you wanted your site to rank for and when users typed in those terms, your page could come up in a query. This process was quickly scrapped due to death, and today, only Yahoo! among the major engines will even index content from the meta keywords tag, and even then they claim not to use these terms for ranking, but merely content discovery.

It is true that other meta tags, namely the title tag and meta description tag (which we’ve covered previously in this guide), are of critical importance to SEO best practices. And, certainly, the meta robots tag is an important tool for controlling spider access. However, SEO is not “all about meta tags”; at least, not anymore.

KEYWORD STUFFING & DENSITY

Not surprisingly, a persistent myth in SEO revolves around the concept that keyword density — a mathematical formula that divides the number of words on a page by the number of instances of a given keyword — is used by the search engines for relevancy & ranking calculations and should therefore be a focus of SEO efforts. Despite being proven untrue and redundant, this has been legit, and indeed, many SEO tools feed on the concept that keyword density is an important metric. It’s not. Ignore it and use keywords intelligently and with modesty in mind. The value from a keyword is not in the keyword density, but in the relevance of the content to the keyword.

PAID SEARCH HELPERS BOLSTER ORGANIC RESULTS

Put on your tin foil hats; it’s time for the most common SEO conspiracy theory — that upping your PPC spend will improve your organic SEO rankings (or, likewise, that lowering that spend can cause ranking drops). In all of the experiences we’ve ever witnessed or heard about, this has never been proven nor has it ever been a probable explanation for effects in the organic results. Google, Yahoo! & Bing all have very effective walls in their organizations to prevent precisely this type of crossover. At Google in particular, advertisers spending tens of millions of dollars each month have noted that even they cannot get special access of consideration from the search quality or web spam teams. So long as the existing barriers are in place and the search engines cultures maintain their separation, we believe that this will remain a myth.

PERSONALIZATION

Personalization seems to primarily affect areas in which we devote tons of time, energy and repeated queries. This means for many/most “discovery” and early funnel searches, we’re going to get very standardized search results. It’s true that it can influence some searches significantly, but it’s also true that, 90% of queries we perform are unaffected (and that goes for what we hear from other SEOs, too). This post helps to validate this, showing that while rankings changes can be dramatic, they only happen when there’s substantive query volume from a user around a specific topic.

RECIPROCAL LINKS

Reciprocal links are of dubious value; they are easy for an algorithm to catch and to discount. Having your own version of the Yahoo directory on your site isn’t helping your users, nor is it helping your SEO.

We wouldn’t be concerned at all with a technically “reciprocated” link, but we would watch out for schemes and directories that leverage this logic to earn their own links and promise value back to your site in exchange. Also, watch out for those who’ve evolved to build “three-way” or “four-way” reciprocal directories such that you link to them and they’ll link to you from a separate site — it’s still attempted manipulation and there’s too many relevant directories out there, why bother?
Search Engine Spam

The practice of spamming the search engines – creating pages and schemes designed to artificially inflate rankings or abuse the ranking algorithms employed to sort content – has been rising since the mid-1990s. With payouts so high (at one point, a fellow SEO noted to us that a single day ranking stop Google’s search results for the query “buy viagra” could bring upwards of $200,000 in affiliate revenue), it’s little wonder that manipulating the engines is such a popular activity on the web. However, it’s become increasingly difficult and, in our opinion, less and less worthwhile for two reasons.

First,

Search engines have learned that users hate spam. This may seem a trivial and obvious lesson, but in fact, many who study the field of search from a macro perspective believe that along with improved relevancy, Google’s greatest product advantage over the last 10 years has been their ability to control and remove spam better than their competitors. While it’s hard to say if this directly influenced their dramatic rise to lead in market share worldwide, it’s undoubtedly something all the engines spend a great deal of time, effort and resources on – and with hundreds of the world’s smartest engineers dedicated to fighting the practice, those of us at SEOmoz loathe to ever recommend search spam as a winnable endeavor in the long term.

Second

Search engines have done a remarkable job identifying scalable, intelligent methodologies for fighting manipulation and making it dramatically more difficult to adversely impact their intended algorithms. Concepts like TrustRank (which SEOMoz’s Linkscope index leverages), HITS, statistical analysis, Historical data and more, along with specific implementations like the Google Sandbox, penalties for directories, reduction of value for paid links, combating footer links, etc. have all driven down the value of search spam and made so-called "white hat" tactics (those that don’t violate the search engines’ guidelines) far more attractive.

This guide is not intended to show off specific spam tactics (either those that no longer work or are still practiced), but, due to the large number of sites that get penalized, banned or flagged and seek help, we will cover the various factors the engines use to identify spam so as to help SEO practitioners avoid problems. For additional details about spam from the engines, see Google’s Webmaster Guidelines, Yahoo’s Search Content Quality Guidelines & Bing’s Guidelines for Successful Indexing.

Page Level Spam Analysis

Search engines perform spam analysis across individual pages and entire websites (domains). We’ll look first at how they evaluate manipulative practices on the URL level.

KEYWORD STUFFING

One of the most obvious and unfortunate spamming techniques, keyword stuffing, involves littering numerous repetitions of keyword terms or phrases into a page in order to make it appear more relevant to the search engines. The thought behind this – that increasing the number of times a term is mentioned can considerably boost a page’s ranking – is generally false. Studies looking at thousands of the top search results across different queries have found that keyword repetitions (or keyword density) appear to play an extremely limited role in boosting rankings, and have a low overall correlation with top placement.

The engines have very obvious and effective ways of fighting this. Scanning a page for stuffed keywords is not massively challenging, and the engines’ algorithms are all up to the task. You can read more about this practice, and Google’s views on the subject, in a blog post from the head of their web spam team - SEO Tip: Avoid Keyword Stuffing.
MANIPULATIVE LINKING

One of the most popular forms of web spam, manipulative link acquisition relies on the search engines' use of link popularity in their ranking algorithms to attempt to artificially inflate these metrics and improve visibility. This is one of the most difficult forms of spamming for the search engines to overcome because it can come in so many forms. A few of the many ways manipulative links can appear include:

- **Reciprocal link exchange programs**, wherein sites create link pages that point back and forth to one another in an attempt to inflate link popularity. The engines are very good at spotting and devaluing those as they fit a very particular pattern.

- **Incestuous or self-referential links**, including "link farms" and "link networks" where fake or low value websites are built or maintained purely as link sources to artificially inflate popularity. The engines combat these through numerous methods of detecting connections between site registrations, link overlap or other common factors.

- **Paid links**, where those seeking to earn higher rankings buy links from sites and pages willing to place a link in exchange for funds. These sometimes evolve into larger networks of link buyers and sellers, and although the engines work hard to stop them (and Google in particular has taken dramatic actions), they persist in providing value to many buyers & sellers (see this post on paid links for more on that perspective and this post from Search Engine Land on the official word from Google & other engines).

- **Low quality directory links** are a frequent source of manipulation for many in the SEO field. A large number of pay-for-placement web directories exist to serve this market and pass themselves off as legitimate with varying degrees of success. Google often takes action against these sites by removing the PageRank score from the toolbar (or reducing it dramatically), but won't do this in all cases.

There are many more manipulative link building tactics that the search engines have identified and, in most cases, found algorithmic methods of reducing their impact. As new spam systems (like this new reciprocal link cloaking scheme uncovered by Avvo Marketing Manager Conrad Smith) emerge, engineers will continue to fight them with targeted algorithms, human reviews and the collection of spam reports from webmasters & SEOs.

CLOAKING

A basic tenant of all the search engine guidelines is to show the same content to the engine's crawlers that you'd show to an ordinary visitor. When this guideline is broken, the engines call it "cloaking" and take action to prevent these pages from ranking in their results. Cloaking can be accomplished in any number of ways and for a variety of reasons, both positive and negative. In some cases, the engines may let practices that are technologically "cloaking" pass, as they're done for positive user experience reasons. For more on the subject of cloaking and the levels of risks associated with various tactics and intents, see this post, White Hat Cloaking, from Rand Fishkin.

"LOW VALUE" PAGES

Although it may not technically be considered "web spam," the engines all have guidelines and methodologies to determine if a page provides unique content and "value" to its searchers before including it in their web indices and search results. The most commonly filtered types of pages are affiliate content (pages whose material is used on dozens or hundreds of other sites promoting the same product/service), duplicate content (pages whose content is a copy of or extremely similar to other pages already in the index), and dynamically generated content pages that provide little unique text or value (this frequently occurs on pages where the same products/services are described for many different geographies with little content segmentation). The engines are generally against including these pages and use a variety of context and link analysis algorithms to filter out "low value" pages from appearing in the results.
Domain Level Spam Analysis

In addition to watching individual pages for spam, engines can also identify traits and properties across entire root domains or subdomains that could flag them as spam signals. Obviously, excluding entire domains is tricky business, but it’s also much more practical in cases where greater scalability is required.

LINKING PRACTICES

Just as with individual pages, the engines can monitor the kinds of links and quality of referrals sent to a site. Sites that are clearly engaging in the manipulative activities described above on a consistent or seriously impacting way may see their search traffic suffer, or even have their sites banned from the index. You can read about some examples of this from past posts - WidgetLah! Gone Wild, What Makes a Good Directory and Why Google Penalized P læ re of Bad Ones, Google’s Sandbox: Still alive, Be´ nignified by Gygery com, and How to Handle a Google Penalty - And, an Example from the Field of Real Estate.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Websites that earn trusted status are often treated differently from those who have not. In fact, many SEOs have commented on the “double standards” that exist for judging “big brand” and high importance sites vs. newer, independent sites. For the search engines, trust most likely has a lot to do with the links your domain has earned (see these videos on Using Trust Rank to Build Your Link Building and How the Link Graph Works, for more). Thus, if you publish low quality, duplicate content on your personal blog, then buy several links from spammy directories, you’re likely to encounter considerable ranking problems. However, if you were to post that same content to a page on Wikipedia and get those same spammy links to point to that URL, it would likely still rank tremendously well - such is the power of domain trust & authority.

Trust built through links is also a great methodology for the engines to employ in considering new domains and analyzing the activities of a site. A little duplicate content and a few suspicious links are far more likely to be overlooked if your site has earned hundreds of links from high quality, editorial sources like CNN.com, LIT.org, Cornell.edu, and similarly reputable players. On the flip side, if you have yet to earn high quality links, judgments may be far sterner from an algorithmic view.

CONTENT VALUE

Similar to how a page’s value is judged against criteria such as uniqueness and the experience it provides to search visitors, so too does this principle apply to entire domains. Sites that primarily serve non-unique, non-valuable content may find themselves unable to rank, even if classic on- and off page factors are performed acceptably. The engines simply don’t want thousands of copies of Wikipedia or Amazon affiliate websites filling up their index, and thus take algorithmic and manual review methods to prevent this.

So How Do You Know If You’ve Been Bad?

It can be tough to know if your site/page actually has a penalty or if things have changed, either in the search engines’ algorithms or on your site that negatively impacted rankings or inclusion.

Before you assume a penalty, check for the following:

STEP 1: RULE OUT

Once you’ve ruled out the list below, follow the flowchart beneath for more specific advice.

Errors

Errors on your site that may have inhibited or prevented crawling.

Changes

Changes to your site or pages that may have changed the way search engines view your content.

(or -page changes, internal link structure changes, content moves, etc.)

Similarity

Sites that share similar backlink profiles, and whether they’ve also lost rankings - when the engines update ranking algorithms, link valuation and importance shift, ranking movements.
While this chart's process won't work for every situation, the logic has been uncanny in helping us identify spam penalties or mistaken flagging for spam by the engines and separating those from basic ranking drops. This page from Google (and the embedded YouTube video) may also provide value on this topic.

Getting Penalties Lifted

The task of requesting re-consideration or re-inclusion in the engines is painful and often unsuccessful. It's also rarely accompanied by any feedback to let you know what happened or why. However, it's important to know what to do in the event of a penalty or turning.

1. If you haven't already, register your site with the engine's Webmaster Tools service (Google's, Yahoo's, Bing's). This registration creates an additional layer of trust and connection between your site and the webmaster teams.

2. Make sure to thoroughly review the data in your Webmaster Tools accounts, from broken pages to server errors or spam alert messages. Very often, what's initially perceived as a mistaken spam penalty is, in fact, related to accessibility issues.

3. Send your re-consideration/re-inclusion request through the engine's Webmaster Tools service rather than the public forum - again, creating a greater trust layer and a better chance of hearing back.

4. Full disclosure is critical to getting consideration. If you've been spamming, own up to everything you've done - links you've acquired, how you got them, who sold them to you, etc. The engines, particularly Google, want the details, as they will apply this information to their algorithms for the future. Hold back, and they're likely to view you as dishonest, corrupt or simply inscrutable (and fail to ever respond).

5. Remove/fix everything you can. If you've acquired bad links, try to get them taken down. If you've done any manipulation on your own site (over-optimization internal linking, keyword stuffing, etc.), get it off before you submit your request.

6. Get ready to wait - responses can take weeks, even months, and re-inclusion itself, if it happens, is a lengthy process. Hundreds (maybe thousands) of sites are penalized every week, so you can imagine the backlog the webmaster teams encounter.

7. If you run a large, powerful brand on the web, re-inclusion can be faster by going directly to an individual source at a conference or event. Engineers from all of the engines regularly participate in search industry conferences (SMX, SES, Pubcon, etc.) and the cost of a ticket can easily outweigh the value of being re-included more quickly than a standard request might take.
Be aware that with the search engines, lifting a penalty is not their obligation or responsibility. Legally (at least, so far), they have the right to include or reject any site/page for any reason (or no reason at all). Inclusion is a privilege, not a right, so be cautious and don’t apply techniques you’re unsure or skeptical of.

CHAPTER TEN

MEASURING & TRACKING SUCCESS

That which can be measured can be improved, and in search engine optimization, measurement is critical to success. Professional SEOs track data about rankings, referrals, links and more to help analyze their campaigns and create road maps for success.

Recommended Metrics to Track

Although every business is unique and every website has different metrics that matter, the following list is nearly universal in appeal. Note that we’re only covering those metrics critical to SEO — optimizing for the search engines — and as such, more general but still important metrics may not be included. For a more comprehensive look at web analytics overall, check out Choosing Web Analytics Key Performance Indicators from Avinash Kaushik’s excellent Web Analytics Blog.

1. SEARCH ENGINE SHARE OF REFERRING VISITS

Every month, it’s critical to keep track of the contribution of each traffic source for your site. Broadly, these include:

* Direct Navigation (type in traffic, bookmarks, email links without tracking codes, etc.)
* Referral Traffic (from links across the web or in trackable email, promotion & branding campaign links)
* Search Engines (queries that sent traffic from any major or major web search engine)

Knowing the percentage and exact numbers will help you identify strengths and weaknesses and serve as a comparison over time for trend data. If, for example, you see that traffic has spiked dramatically but it comes from referral links with low relevance while search engine and direct type-ins fail, you’ll know you’re actually in much more trouble than the raw numbers would suggest. You should use this data to track your marketing efforts and to serve as a broad measurement for your traffic acquisition efforts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search Engine</th>
<th>Referring Visits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google</td>
<td>348,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bing</td>
<td>194,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo</td>
<td>10,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask</td>
<td>3,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSN Search</td>
<td>1,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo Search</td>
<td>1,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask Answers</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOL Search</td>
<td>1,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>72,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>512,750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL NUMBER OF VISITS TO SEOMOZ (January 1 - March 31, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search Engine</th>
<th>Total Visits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google</td>
<td>238,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bing</td>
<td>195,363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo</td>
<td>5,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask</td>
<td>1,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSN Search</td>
<td>1,872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo Search</td>
<td>1,038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask Answers</td>
<td>1,072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOL Search</td>
<td>1,093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>435,259</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25% of SEOMOZ’s traffic comes from search engines.
2. VISITS REFERRED BY SPECIFIC SEARCH ENGINE!

Three major engines make up 95%+ of all search traffic in the US (Yahoo!, Bing & Google), and for most countries outside the US (with the notable exceptions of Russia, China, Japan, Korea & the Czech Republic) 80%+ of search traffic comes solely from Google.

Measuring the contribution of your search traffic from each engine is critical for several reasons:

**Compare Performance vs. Market Share**

By tracking not only search engines broadly, but by country, you'll be able to see exactly the contribution level of each engine in accordance with its estimated market share. Keep in mind that in sectors like technology and Internet services, demand is likely to be higher on Google (given its younger, more tech-savvy demographic) than is news media (if you were to compare the two). Remember, however, that this isn't the same as market share. Google has more engagement, which means more clicks and more revenue potential.

**Get Visibility Into Potential Drops**

If your search traffic should drop significantly at any point, knowing the relative and exact contributions from each engine will be essential to diagnosing the issue. If all the engines drop off equally, the problem is almost certainly one of accessibility. If Google drops while the others remain at previous levels, it's more likely to be a penalty or devaluation of your SEO efforts by that singular engine.

**Uncover Strategic Value**

It's very likely that some efforts you undertake in SEO will have greater positive results on some engines than others. For example, we frequently notice that on-page optimization tactics like better keyword inclusion and targeting have more benefit with Bing & Yahoo than Google, while gaining specific anchor text links from a large number of domains has a more positive impact on Google than the others. If you can identify the tactics that are having success with one engine (or that are failing to succeed with others), you'll better know how to focus your efforts.

If you find your site underperforming at one of the engines (based on broad market share numbers), don't immediately panic. Remember that search engines have demographics and biases just like any other referral source. For example, in the US, Google's market share is supposed to be 65-70%, yet the vast majority of sites we've ever worked with (and those reported by our friends and colleagues in the search marketing industry) show that 80-85% of traffic share from Google is actually far more common.

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A number of theories exist to support why this happens:

1. Yahoo’s top queries are navigational (their number one query is Google, for example), while Google’s queries are more informational
2. Many experts believe (and have private data to suggest) that Yahoo has a preference for sites participating in their paid inclusion program
3. Yahoo refers a large amount of traffic to Yahoo’s own properties (Google, meanwhile, seems to have a similar love affair with Wikipedia)

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Don't just rely on Comscore, Hitwise or Compete.com data to tell you what percentage of share an engine should provide – make sure to investigate it. You can do this by running PPC ads on the various engines (and comparing impression data), checking rankings across the engines (if your Yahoo! rankings are just as good or better than your Google rankings, it's not missed opportunity, it's lower volume), and making sure you haven't made any dumb mistakes (blocking other engines' spiders, using the meta robots NOOPD to control listings at Google, but forgetting to use NOYDIR at Yahoo, etc.).
3. VISITS REFERRED BY SPECIFIC SEARCH ENGINE TERMS AND PHRASES

The terms & phrases that send traffic are another important piece of your analytics pie. You’ll want to keep track of these on a regular basis to help identify new trends in keyword demand, gauge your performance on key terms and find terms that are bringing significant traffic you’re potentially under-serving (e.g., you rank well and get visits, but don’t have content that helps the searcher accomplish their goal).

You may also find value in tracking search referral counts for terms outside the “top” terms/phrases — those that are important and valuable to your business. If the trend lines are pointing in the wrong direction, you know efforts need to be undertaken to course correct. Search traffic worldwide has consistently risen over the past 15 years, so a decline in quantity of referrals is troubling — check for seasonality issues (keywords that are only in demand certain times of the week/month/year) and rankings (have you dropped, or has search volume ebbed).

4. CONVERSION RATE BY SEARCH QUERY TERM/PHRASE

When it comes to the bottom line for your organization, few metrics matter as much as conversion. However, analytics often misses the impact of conversion rates from the last referral, clouding the true picture of what brought a visitor who “converted.” For example, in the graph to the right, 4.46% of visitors who reached SEO.net with the query “check backlinks” signed up to become members during that visit. What we don’t know (at least, from this simple analysis), is how many of these visitors had already signed up, how many signed up during a later visit, or even what percentage of those visitors were first-time visitors.

The real value from this sort of simplistic tracking comes from the “low-hanging fruit” – seeing terms/phrases that continually send visitors who convert and increasing focus on both rankings and traffic from that keyword referral as well as improving the landing pages that visitors reach. While conversion rate tracking from keyword phrase referrals is certainly important, it’s never the whole story. Dig deeper and you can often uncover far more interesting and applicable data about how conversion starts and ends on your site.

5. NUMBER OF PAGES RECEIVING AT LEAST ONE VISIT FROM SEARCH ENGINES

Knowing the number of pages that receive search engine traffic is an essential metric for monitoring overall SEO performance. From this number, we can get a glimpse into indexation (how many pages the engines are keeping in their indices from our site), and, more importantly, watch trends over time, for most large websites (50,000+ pages), more inclusion is essential to earning traffic, and this metric delivers a trackable number that’s indicative of success or failure. As you work on issues like site architecture, link acquisition, XML Sitemaps, uniqueness of content and meta data, etc. the trend line should rise, showing that more and more pages are earning their way into the engines’ results. Pages receiving search traffic is, quite possibly, the best long tail metric around.

While other analytics data points are also of great importance, those mentioned above should be universally applied to get the maximum value from your SEO campaigns.
Additional Sources:

* SEO Metrics that matter – (from Stephan Spencer of NetConcepts)
* Advanced Google Analytics Tips for SEO, Part 1, II, and III (from Houston)

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**Analytics Software**

* The Right Tools for the Job*

**Paid**

* Omniture
* Fireclick
* Mint
* Sawmill Analytics
* Clicktale
* Enquisite
* Coremetrics
* Lyris / Clicktracks
* Unica Affinium NetInsight

**Freebies**

* Yahoo! Web Analytics (formerly IndexTools)
* Google Analytics
* Clickey Web Analytics
* Piwik Open Source Analysis
* Woopra Website Tracking
* AWSstats

While choosing can be tough, at the time of publication, our top recommendation is for Google Analytics (so long as you have few privacy concerns and don’t mind the brief data delays), followed closely by Clickey. Yahoo! Web Analytics also has a solution worth considering. If you cannot use tracking code on your web pages and need a log-file based solution, AWSstats is our top recommendation, though any log file based tracking will suffer from the inability to track clickstream paths, first time vs. referring and other important metrics as accurately as cookie/session based software.

No matter which analytics software you decide is right for you, we also strongly recommend testing different versions of pages on your site and making conversion rate improvements based on the results. Testing pages on your site can be as simple as using a free tool to test two versions of a page header or as complex as using an expensive multivariate software to simultaneously test hundreds of variants of a page. There are many testing platforms out there, but if you’re looking to put a first toe in the testing waters, one free, easy to use solution we recommend is Google’s Website Optimizer. It’s a great way to get started running tests that can inform powerful conversion rate improvements.
Metrics for Measuring

Search Engine Optimization

In organic SEO, it can be difficult to track the specific elements of the engines' algorithms effectively given that this data is not public, nor is it even well-researched. However, a combination of tactics have become best practices, and new data is constantly emerging to help track direct ranking elements and positive/negative ranking signals. The data points covered below are ones that we will occasionally recommend to track campaigns and have proven to add value when used in concert with analytics.

METRICS PROVIDED BY SEARCH ENGINES

We've already discussed many of the data points provided by services such as Google's Webmaster Tools, Yahoo! Site Explorer and Microsoft's Webmaster Tools. In addition to these, the engines provide some insight through publicly available queries and competitive intelligence. Below is a list of queries/tools/metrics from the engines, along with their respective applications.

Employing these queries & tools effectively requires that you have an informational need with an actionable solution. The data itself isn't valuable unless you have a plan of what to change/build/do once you learn what you need to know (this holds true for competitive analysis as well).

Google Site Query

e.g., site:seomoz.org – useful to see the number and list of pages indexed on a particular domain. You can expand the value by adding additional query parameters. For example – site:seomoz.org/blog inurl:tools – will show only those pages in Google's index that are in the blog and contain the word "tools" in the URL. While this number fluctuates, it is still a good rough measurement. You can read more about this on this blog post.

Google Trends

Available at Google.com/Trends – this shows keyword search volume/popularity data over time. If you're logged into your Google account, you can also get specific numbers on the charts, rather than just trend lines.

Google Trends for Websites

Available at Trends.Google.com/websites – This shows traffic data for websites according to Google's data sources (toolbar, ISP data, analytics and others may be part of this). A logged in user account will show numbers in the chart to indicate estimated traffic levels.

Google Insights for Search

Available at google.com/insights/search – this tool provides data about regional usage, popularity and related queries for keywords.
Applying that Data

To Your Campaign

Just knowing the numbers won’t help unless you can effectively interpret and apply changes to course-correct. Below, we’ve taken a sample of some of the most common directional signals provided by tracking data points and how to respond with actions to improve or execute on opportunities.

Fluctuation

In Search Engine Page and Link Count Numbers

The numbers reported in “site:” and “link:” queries are rarely precise, and thus we strongly recommend not getting too worried about fluctuations showing massive increases or decreases unless they are accompanied by traffic drops. For example, on any given day, Yahoo! reports between 800,000 and 2 million links to the SEOMoz.org domain. Obviously, we don’t gain or lose hundreds of thousands of links each day, but the variability of Yahoo!’s indices means that these numbers reports provide little guidance about our actual link growth or shrinkage.

If you do see significant drops in links or pages indexed accompanied by similar traffic referral drops from the search engines, you may be experiencing a real loss of link juice (check to see if important links that were previously sending traffic/rankings boosts still exist) or a loss of indexing due to penalties, hacking, malware, etc. A thorough analysis using your own web analytics and Google’s Webmaster Tools can help to identify potential problems.
Falling
Search Traffic from a Single Engine

If a single engine is sending you considerably less traffic for a wide range of search queries, a small number of possibilities exist.

“Identify the problem most likely to be the culprit and investigate. Forums like Cre8asit Forums, HighRankings and Google’s Groups for Webmasters who can help.”

Falling
Search Traffic from Multiple Engines

Chances are good that you’ve done something on your site to block crawlers or stop indexing. This could be enriching the robots.txt or meta robots tags, a problem with hosting/uptime, a DNS resolution issue or a number of other technical breakdowns. Talk to your system administrator, developers and/or hosting provider and carefully review your Webmaster Tools accounts and analytics to help determine potential causes.

Individual
Ranking Fluctuations

Gaining or losing rankings for a particular term/phrase or even several happens millions of times a day to millions of pages and is generally nothing to be concerned about. Ranking algorithms fluctuate, competitors gain and lose links (and on-page optimization tactics) and search engines even flux between indices (and may sometimes even make mistakes in their crawling, inclusion or ranking processes). When a dramatic rankings decrease occurs, you might want to carefully review on-page elements for any signs of over-optimization or violation of guidelines (cloaking, keyword stuffing, etc.) and check to see if links have recently been gained or lost. Note that with sudden spikes in rankings for new content, a temporary period of high visibility followed by a dramatic drop is common (in the SEO field, we refer to this as the “freshness boost”).

Positive
Increases in Link Metrics Without Rankings Increases

Many site owners worry that when they’ve done some “classic” SEO — on-page optimization, link acquisition, etc. they can expect instant results. This, sadly, is not the case. Particularly for new site and pages and content that’s competing in very difficult results, rankings take time and even earning lots of great links is not a sure recipe to instantly reach the top. Remember that the engines need to not only crawl all those pages where you’ve acquired links, but index and process them — given the almost certain use of delta indices by the engines to help with freshness, the metrics and rankings you’re seeking may be days or even weeks behind the progress you’ve made.

“Don’t panic over small fluctuations. With large drops, be wary against making a judgment call until at least a few days have past. If you run a new site or are in the process of link acquisition and active marketing, these sudden spikes and drops are even more common, so simply be prepared and keep working.”
Congratulations! You’ve made it through the entire Beginner’s Guide to SEO!
Now you are ready to start optimizing your own site, implement the tricks you have just learned and improve your search results in the major search engines.

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