KILLER CONTENT STRATEGY & PERFECT TECHNICAL SEO

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE

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PART 1

COMPLETE ON-PAGE SEO TECHNIQUES FOR A KILLER CONTENT STRATEGY

In this two-part series I break up the content like so:

Part 1: Content Strategy & User Experience
Part 2: Technical Auditing & Maintenance

Building processes around these goals will satisfy users' search intent and help position your site well in 2017 and beyond.

After going through these tutorials, I want you to feel confident creating and designing content experiences that satisfies user needs and creates an exceptional experience for them, while improving your organic search positions over the long term. If you learn to use the technical tools and understand some key reports in Search Console you will be well on your way toward both. I will show you how.

Let's Get Started!

Use Search Console For On-Page SEO Domination (Formerly known as Google Webmaster Tools or GWT)

You can manage almost all the elements in this tutorial using Search Console (previously known as Google Webmaster Tools/GWT). Below is a great walk-through of how to get started with Search Console by the folks at Tilted Pixel. Some of the sidebar items shown in the video have since been deprecated by Google, but there is always a new and improved tool to replace the one you no longer see there. Learn how to use these tools to get important data about your site and keep your search presence clean.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDfw4yt554g

PART 1: CONTENT STRATEGY & USER EXPERIENCE

When creating content, 2 factors must be considered: humans and search engines. You'll need to create content for humans that will satisfy buying intent, but keep search engines in mind. How do you go about this?

Create A Positive User Experience Through UX/UI

If someone doesn't know you, then why should they trust you? You have to earn that trust by validating it with on-page elements that users expect to see when they visit your site. Establishing trust through UX/UI elements is going to affect your SEO because it affects your user engagement rates (bounce rates, pages per visit, page views etc.).

What to do here to establish trust? I like to quote the famous Steve Krug on all things usability, seeing as his common-sense approach speaks to the most people: "Don't make me think."

> "I should be able to 'get it'—what it is and how to use it—without expending any effort thinking about it."
>
> Steve Krug, Don't Make Me Think

Things that fall into this category:

Navigation - Is it intuitive to use and to consume content?

Copywriting - Does the content match what the user expects to find? Is it well-written and easy to understand?

Color Scheme - Pick the right one for your audience.

Layout - Is it easy to scan and get an understanding of what the site is about?

Trustworthiness - Is there a positive social presence that a user can see, e.g., how many people have shared this content?

Testimonials - Do other people like me trust these site owners to do business with?

References - Do you link out to external references that are trustworthy and have authority in your niche?

Page Load Speed

This factor can be considered part of your technical SEO auditing, but I put more weight on it as a UX element since page speed affects user experience. User satisfaction is a signal that Google can interpret in many ways. We know page speed to be one of those signals, probably due to the fact that quick-loading sites earn higher engagement rates and links, which are signs that the site is pleasing to both visitors and search engines. Don't let this easy-to-fix factor cause abandonment and low rankings. Fortunately, Google provides you with a tool to diagnose what is slowing down your pages, and it's FREE, so use it!

https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights/

Example:

Keyword Targeting

Don't make the 'over-optimization' mistake so many sites make. Optimize each page of your site for one main keyword per page and use that exact phrase in the page title, meta description, headings and body content for best results.

Use a combination of tools to find keywords that will be a happy medium between search volume, competition (i.e., something you can reasonably rank for), and phrases that your site is already receiving traffic for.

Keyword Planner - Google

Use AdWords for Google search volume and competition to get a good seed list. Start with your main product, service or landing page.

You may want to define targeting options to tighten up results.

The best keyword options are those with low competition and high search volume, but in most industries those can be hard to come by, or mean there is low buying intent around those terms (i.e., terms that are informationally motivated as opposed to consumer-driven). If you aren't seeing a lot of low competition/high volume options, go for the next best (medium competition/good search volume and so on) until you have a good seed list for your main pages, category pages and product pages.

Ahrefs

If you need more options, Ahrefs Keywords Explorer Tool opens up a new landscape of possibilities. I would recommend throwing your seed list in there and seeing what you get back. This can be a gold mine for keywords to target for blog posts, infographics or other educational content.

Search Console - Google

Last but not least, head back to your old standby: Google Search Console.

These are queries that currently bring traffic to your site. You can click on the individual query from the list, then click Pages to see what Page that specific query ranks for.

This brings up some things to consider.

If a page is already ranking for a phrase, there are 3 ways you can help improve it further:

1) Make sure it is further optimized for that keyword
2) Do not use the keyword on another page
3) Look for low-hanging fruit opportunities

Queries that you are ranking in position 6-10 for are "low-hanging fruit"—these will be easiest to move above the fold into positions 1-5 with a solid content strategy. Start creating content around these phrases today!

Keyword Targeting for E-Commerce

On an e-commerce site it may be difficult to create a product page that satisfies buying intent while also ranking for a keyword. That's because there is oftentimes not enough content on-page to do both. How do we work with the natural limitations of an e-commerce page?

My recommendation is to optimize your e-commerce page for the main keyword you want to rank for or have the best shot at ranking for (see Search Console > Queries) and then create some additional content that can both rank for long-tail search terms more easily and link back to your e-commerce product page.

Page Titles

This is one of the most important on-page elements. Not only does it affect CTR a UX ranking factor, but it is also the first thing a search engine sees when it crawls your site. Give each webpage on your site its own unique title and make sure the most important pages are optimized with one keyword for that page. To help ensure your page title isn't cut off in search results, check its length with this handy pixel counter tool.

Meta Descriptions

These serve as banners inviting visits in. Your webpage meta description should contain one main keyword and information about the page that users and search engines need to understand your content and webpage.

You want to make sure you don't overdo it on length. I use a handy character counter tool to make sure I hit my mark and am not over or under character counts for my meta descriptions.

Pro tip: Use the keyword exactly as appears in your keyword research tool. Don't use a variation. This is especially important when you are just starting out and badly need traffic. Optimize for one, exact keyword and put it in your title, meta description, URL and content. You can add variations throughout the page content, but make sure to use your exact target keyword for that page 3-5 times in the body copy.

The image on the right is a great example I'm borrowing from Backlinko. This shows you the ideal title and meta format for an e-commerce webpage.

H1

A header stands out to a crawler because it tells it what the page content is about. If you add multiple H's, crawlers read theses as sections – think main category > subcategory on down the page. It is another chance to add your target keyword. Don't miss the opportunity.

Alt Text

It would be injustice to your site as a whole to optimize just your copy and leave out your images. Each image uploaded should have the alt title and description space filled for SEO purposes. Additional benefits include:

- Opportunity to add even more keywords on page. Don't get lazy now!
- Helps your page rank in Google image search
- Makes your website accessible to visually impaired

URL Structure

Using search engine-friendly URLs for your webpages are important. Try to avoid using URLs with dates and numbers and use a clean URL structure that includes a category/folder hierarchy. Always include a keyword as close to the front of the URL as possible. For example:

http://damolade.com/blog/bonus-growth-hack-your-content-marketing-checklist

A bad URL structure would look like this:

http://damolade.com/blog/page?65

Clean up messy URL parameters, inconsistent categories and tagging systems, or else things can get ugly real quick.

Related Topics - Targeting Long-Tail Keywords

Remember the image above showing an example of skin care long-form content linking back to skin care product pages? We do that because it's easier to rank on long-tail keywords, get visibility, and pass that authority over to our product pages, rather than pass authority from more competitive pages to long-form content.

Google has a huge graph of lexical combinations and the power to analyze semantic relationships between content. This means Google can see your long-form content on skin care and associate that with other terms on your site such as cleansers, moisturizers, serums, etc. These related topics are very important to the main topic; therefore as a content creator you should understand what the lexical combinations are for your niche and monitor what the competition is doing with these as well.

Word Count

Over time, and with updates to Google's search algorithm, the optimum minimum number of words per article has increased exponentially. Research has shown that web content with over 1,500 words tends to rank significantly higher than posts with fewer words. This is another great reason to target long-tail keywords with long-form content that contains links to your product pages.

(image courtesy backlinko)

The average Google first page result contains 1,890 words.

Key Takeaways

Let's recap what we've learned so far:

Creating a positive user experience through a carefully designed SEO content strategy is key to success in 2017. These are the main UX elements you must consider:

- Navigation
- Copywriting
- Color Scheme
- Layout
- Trustworthiness
- Testimonials
- References

Page Speed is a UX experience must have as well as an SEO ranking factor. Use PageSpeed Insights tool to make your pages lightening fast.

Don't over optimize! One keyword per page is the goal.

Optimize your Page Titles for click through rate (CTR).

Meta Description content needs to close me on your sell. End with a call to action.

Page headings (<h1>, <h2's>) and Alt text (image names) are more opportunities to tell search engines what your page is about as well as a good thing for accessibility. Use these tags.

Search friendly and descriptive URLs are a must have - no numbers, no special characters. Keep 'em clean.

Aim to write at least 300 words of content on every landing page. For blog posts, up this considerably to about 1,500 words.

There you have it! On to the tech stuff...

PART 2

ON-PAGE OPTIMIZATION FOR PERFECT TECHNICAL SEO: AUDITING & SITE MAINTENANCE

While creating strategic, optimized content is key for SEO success, other factors need to be considered to maintain your site health and user experience. There are crucial technical audits and spot-maintenance checks you need to schedule to stay on track and keep your site healthy. Below I will walk you through each of these elements and show you where to look to find everything that needs your attention. Some things you can fix on your own if you are technical enough like resolving server errors, while some you may need to hire a professional to help.

As we talked about in Part 1 of this series, Search Console (previously Google Webmaster Tools/GWT), has evolved into almost all you need to manage and keep your on-site SEO and search presence healthy. It is your best friend for identifying issues and managing your site maintenance quickly, easily and for $0.

Sitemap

If you are adding a lot of content on a regular basis you should let Google know about it as quickly as possible. It can take a while for search engines to get around to crawling your site and indexing its content. Although there are no guarantees that if you submit your sitemap to Google you will rank faster, it doesn't hurt. Why not increase your chances of refreshing your presence sooner and possibly expanding your indexation rate?

Check out this video of Google engineer Matt Cutts "hamming it up" that explains indexation well.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNHR6IQJGZs

Every website ought to have a sitemap which search engines use to understand the organization of your site content. Every month, you should review your website sitemap, and if you have made changes to your site generate an updated version and re-submit to search engines. You can resubmit in Search Console.

A 100% indexed site is ideal, but is very rare. Realistically, 90+% of the sitemap pages should be indexed. This amount will be lower for new sites, but you should be able to see the rate increase over time. You should be looking for two indicators:

1) Is the percentage of indexed pages increasing over time, or holding steady?
2) Does the number of pages submitted match the total number of pages that are actually on the site?

If the answer to either one of these questions is "no," you should monitor this and search for possible reasons why. Common issues include things like 404 errors and blocked resources that I go into detail about below.

Review 404 errors

A 404 error means a webpage which the user is trying to reach cannot be found on your site. This can occur for a number of reasons, most commonly a broken link or a bad redirect. Although 404 errors are not directly harmful to your site's SEO, they may indirectly cause harm by affecting usability and trust. No one likes to land on a 404 page, not even a search engine. Run a monthly audit and fix these.

In Search Console, click Crawl, and select Crawl Errors. See what you're dealing with.

Review Structured Data

Structured data, also known as rich snippets to the user, marks up your content so that Google can display "rich results" such as:

If you or your developer take the time to mark up the HTML with structured data you will get these visually appealing search results. These types of results are known to improve clickthrough rates of 20-30% according to Moz. From a user experience perspective, they provide benefits such as:

1) Drawing a user's attention to your relevant result
2) Providing instant information as related to their search query

These aren't available for all types of sites, so see the full list of the type of content that Google supports rich snippets for here: Google documentation.

If you have structured data on your site you should review it for errors as well as opportunities to add new snippets. To review structured data, head over to Search Console > Search Appearance > Structured Data in the dropdown menu.

This report shows you the total number of structured data items found, trends in structured data over time and the types of structured data found on the site:

When viewing the report, look for decreasing structured data and/or structured data with errors, and implement a fix.

Check Title Tags

As I previously detailed, a title tag is one of the most important on-page factors to consider. You should monitor these on a regular basis to make sure there are no errors such as:

- Missing title tags
- Duplicate title tags
- Too long or too short title tags
- Non-informative title tags (i.e., relevant to the page content)

Also make sure that they are optimized for one main keyword. Once again head to Search Console > Search Appearance > HTML Improvements to check your title tags.

Check “Links To Your Site” Report for Bad Links

Page rank is an important signal, but it is only 1 of 200 things Google looks at to determine the rank of your site. Even so, many site owners build or hire someone to build backlinks for them that in turn get them penalized by Google. Paid links, or other link schemes, violate Google Webmaster Guidelines and therefore, in order to rank well you want to avoid doing these things.

If you review your “Links To Your Site” report below you will get a list of backlinks. If you see any that look low-quality or spammy, you should do what you can to remove that link from your profile. If you are unable to remove a link, you can take further action by disavowing it in the Search Console. This is a two-step process. First download all the links to your site. Next, you'll create a file containing only the links you want to disavow, and upload this to Google.

1) On the Search Console home page, click the site you want.
2) On the Dashboard, click Search 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 on the latest links, you'll see dates as well.

Use this to create a text file (the file type must be .txt and it must be encoded in UTF-8 or 7-bit ASCII) containing only the links you want to disavow—one link per line. If you want Google to ignore all links from an entire domain (like example.com), add the line "domain:example.com".

Here's a sample of a valid file:

```
# example.com removed most links, but missed these
http://spam.example.com/stuff/comments.html
http://spam.example.com/stuff/paid-links.html
# Contacted owner of shadyspam.com on 7/1/2012 to
# ask for link removal but got no response
Domain:shadyspam.com
```

Upload a list of links to disavow:

1) Go to the disavow links tool page.
2) Select your website.
3) Click Disavow links.
4) Click Choose file.

Give Google some time to process this information. Hopefully, if you were diligent, you will only have to do this one time.

Look at Historical Site Performance

Historical site performance is when you look at the current quarter, the last 12 months, and all-time data. You are looking to compare how current performance—i.e., quarter-over-quarter, year-over-year—compares to the past performance of the same.

Here is how you look at quarter-over-quarter in Google Analytics:

Look at the last 3 full months of data and check Compare to Previous period. Analytics will give you the previous quarter and you'll have yourself a comparison!

If you want to see year over year select a date range within the current year and check Compare to: Previous Year.

What you want to look out for are any anomalies, either good or bad in your traffic and conversions. To do this dig into your individual traffic sources/channels and look for large spikes either up or down.

In the example of the quarterly audit, I see a big decline in referral traffic, over 80%. So I would want to investigate the individual channels that declined to find out if this is a good or bad thing.

Click on Referral to open up the Referral sources and check out the URLs that are listed. In the case below, we get lucky and have no reason to be alarmed! The referrers were mostly spammy sites which have all since gone away. Hence the drop in my referral traffic.

So in a case like this, no action would be needed, besides maybe setting up a spam filter in GA. However, if the declines came from a site where you have a guest post or an article submission for example, then you'd definitely want to reach out to to the site owner and investigate - perhaps your content was removed or a link is broken? These are all things you can determine by auditing traffic channels regularly.

If you are running an e-commerce site, you definitely want to keep an eye on Revenue and Transactions. How are those doing quarter-over-quarter, year-over-year? This could be a post all on its own, but you get my point. Any steep declines and you may have on-page conversion problems to solve.

Review robots.txt

This text file in the root of your website's folder communicates a certain number of guidelines to search engine crawlers. Know what it is that you want to communicate and what you want to "disallow." For example, an e-commerce robot.txt would want to disallow crawlers from accessing their shopping cart so the file would contain lines like:

```
User-agent: *
Disallow: /checkout
Disallow: /cart
```

It's also OK to add your sitemap in your robot.txt since you will be updating that regularly. That line looks like:

```
Sitemap: https://www.example.com/sitemap
```

What you don't want to ever see is a line in your sitemap that looks like:

```
User-agent: * Disallow: /
```

Because that is basically telling search engines to not crawl your entire site.

Testing to make sure there are no errors in your robot.txt file is also easy to do using Search Console.

Go to Crawl > robot.txt Tester and input the path of your robot.txt file. Google will tell you if it can access and will also give you a list of any errors or warnings.

You can also edit and submit your robot.txt file here, but be sure and read the Google guidelines on this before you get started.

Mobile Friendliness

Last but certainly not least, is mobile-friendliness. For 2016 and beyond, this may be the most important update you can make to your landing pages. Luckily, Google has a Mobile-Friendly Test you can use to input your URL and report if the page has a mobile-friendly design.

Start by testing your home page:

Hopefully you will get this message:

Awesome! This page is mobile-friendly.

If you haven't updated your site in awhile, this is the message you will most likely see. With problems specific to your landing page listed below the message:

Not mobile-friendly

Page appears not mobile-friendly

- ✕ Text too small to read
- ✕ Mobile viewport not set
- ✕ Links too close together
- ✕ Content wider than screen

Follow the directions on the report page that Google provides.

A recent mobile marketing statistics compilation from SmartInsights shows just where we are in terms of mobile usage. It's no longer about whether visitors will want to access your site from a mobile device, it's to the point where you should know your visitors' preferences (i.e., tablet, mobile phone, or other devices) and be optimizing for them.

Mobile media time in the U.S. is now significantly higher at 51% as compared to desktop at 42%. If you cannot fix errors yourself, it is time to hire a designer to get your site up to snuff for 2016 and beyond.

Key Takeaways

Let's recap what we've learned so far:

Search Console has evolved into the go-to tool for managing and keeping your on-site SEO and search presence healthy. It is your best friend for identifying issues and managing your site maintenance quickly, easily and for $0. The best way to stay on top of site maintenance is to schedule it. Put the dates into your calendar and follow up with everything on the above list. My SEO Audit checklist will help you stay on track with this.

Key Takeaways:

Keep your sitemap updated and resubmit it to Search Console when you add new content.

Try and resolve as many 404 errors as you can on your own and seek help if things are beyond your expertise.

If you have any of these types of sites: mobile apps, products, recipes, or reviews; adding structured data can really enhance your search presence and create attractive calls-to-action in search results.

Google tells you what to do to improve your HTML and metadata. Do it. Depending on what link building activities you've engaged in in the past, you could potentially have some backlinks that are hurting your rankings. Go through the report and check on any links that look suspicious and contact the webmasters to remove them.

Approximately every 3 months you should look at historical site performance (this quarter, the last 12 months and all-time) to see how current performance compares to past performance. If you have numbers that are down for a certain KPI, it's time to dig a little deeper there.

There you have it!

There is a lot to maintain in the typical website environment. If you're looking to outsource this process to ensure you have all your boxes checked for a healthy and well-maintained site at the end of every month, let us know. We carefully choose a few new sites each month to help with site maintenance.

Happy auditing!

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