



SEO: IT'S NOT DEAD

2013

Written by: Andre Savoie, Digital Marketing Expert

Has earning top rankings on Google and other search engines become something you can legitimately do yourself (or in-house) if you're willing to read, study and learn? If not, is it still necessary to hire consultants or marketing firms that have expertise in the techniques used to obtain these top rankings? Or is SEO just simply a thing of the past, and no longer worth pursuing?

The reality is that search marketing is becoming a more significant driver of business and market share expansion than it ever has been in the past. While SEO is not the complete answer (as a company must have a solid PPC strategy as well) if done well, it can provide companies with an outstanding return on investment. Unfortunately, if done poorly, SEO can have a dramatically negative impact on a business (which we'll cover later when we discuss Panda and Penguin). SEO consultants and companies are quick to talk about the tricks and techniques they use to help your website magically float up the search rankings, but what they seldom warn you of is how these same techniques are resulting in companies being kicked out of Google's search rankings completely. And that undoing the damage can cost many times more than you paid the search consulting firm in the beginning.

But as with most things, the difference between the "black-hat" techniques that expose companies to the wrath of Google, and the Google endorsed methods (what WSI refers to as Adaptive SEO) are not simple to understand on the surface. After all, assuming you even know what Google's Search Quality Guidelines are, or what great content is and how to produce it, if no one visits your website, will it matter? The simple answer is no.

The first question business owners and executives usually ask is "how do I get to the top of Google rankings", followed closely by "how long is this going to take"? The reality is that there are no simple answers to these questions, and definitely no "one size fits all" strategy. Those of us who have done this long enough have seen many cases of the same strategy work quickly for one website and taking longer (or not work at all) for another site to know that each case is unique.

With all this said, it's easy to understand why the vast amount of information floating around might encourage business owners and managers to believe they can manage their online marketing in-house. But the reality is that the competition for the top spaces in search results has never been more crowded, more competitive, and faster changing than it is today.

In fact, with all things being considered, one could make the argument that businesses need outside help now more than ever. Let's find out why, and what you can do about it.

A Brief History of SEO

Ever since people began to take notice of the common factors that were shared among websites that ranked, those in the industry began cobbling together "best practices" or "how to guides" that listed these common factors and explained how mastering them would ensure your site ranks well.

For instance, early on, people began to notice that placing keywords within the certain snippets of code on their websites called "meta tags" seemed to have a positive impact on rankings. Those websites which had lots of good keywords ranked well, and so it became "best practice" to place as many keywords as possible in these areas of the website.

Later on, this became known as "keyword stuffing" and is now frowned upon. However, the cycle which led to the advent of keyword stuffing has been repeated over and over again by those who are supposedly experts in the field. After keyword stuffing came the advent of link farms, after link farms came content farms, and on it goes.

All of this leads us to Rule #1 in SEO.

SEO Rule #1: You Can't Beat the System

Ever since people began to correlate the impact of minor changes they made on their websites to better rankings, the dangerous notion has taken root that these minor changes must somehow be the magic reason for the improvements, and that more of this magic formula must be a good thing. While this seems like sound logic, the reality is that there are hundreds of factors which determine how websites rank, and Google (or any other search engine) has not publicly disclosed these factors to anyone.

For business owners, this means that you can't crack Google's code, or latch on to one thing that you found on a website that is only open for a limited time, and is so successful that they can't share it with the public. There are no "get rich quick" schemes when it comes to Google rankings, and you can't beat the system. The only way is to do it the hard way.

Enter the Google Animals – Panda and Penguin

As if Google needed to prove the validity of SEO Rule #1, in the last few years they have introduced monumental changes to their ranking algorithms using the names of cute, cuddly animals to somehow soften the blow. The irony is that as cute as a panda or a penguin can be, many website owners were financially devastated by the impact of these changes as they helplessly watched their website rankings plummet in a very short time frame.

You can read everything there is to know about these updates by doing a quick Google search, but for the purposes of this book the most important thing to understand is that the real impact of the Panda and Penguin updates is that they have re-defined what is considered "good quality" work on the web. Google's primary goal has always been to deliver users the "best" websites that match their search query, and Panda and Penguin offer new standards for what qualifies as the best.

The Panda update created a new set of guidelines for what qualifies as "high quality" content. However, for those who are not familiar with it (including many SEO companies who still deliver their services using pre-Panda techniques), it might be easier to list what does not qualify. Specifically, Panda was originally created to reduce the visibility of websites who produced lots of content that was lightly written on a given topic. For instance, they rationed that you could not write a good article on "What to do after a divorce" in 300 words or less, and so they began rooting out these types of sites which created lots of content that wasn't very thorough in favor of more detailed treatments of these topics.

Over the last year or so, Panda has been through several updates and it seems the guidelines continue to get more specific. The end result is that Google has sent a very loud message that they want to see website owners produce in-depth, high quality content that its users will benefit from reading.

The Penguin update dealt with quality guidelines as well, but specifically addressed the area of link building. This whole topic of links deserves its own whitepaper, but the end result was very similar. Websites that had previously benefitted from obtaining lots of links from low quality sources were negatively impacted. With Penguin, Google set guidelines for what a high quality or "earned" link should look like, something which had never been established before.

The unfortunate thing is that much like trying to define beauty, Google's attempt to define quality has left a lot of room for debate among those who follow such things. The over-arching theme was that websites would be rewarded for producing high quality content and earning legitimate high value links, and the real question then becomes what is high

quality content, and how do you find the time to create it or earn a link for this?

The sum of all these changes is that Google wanted to reinforce SEO Rule #1, and to introduce us to SEO Rule #2.

Evolution of Content Based Marketing

After reading all of this, we won't blame you if you wonder what the heck you should be doing if you want to improve your online visibility. Don't feel alone, many other business owners and entrepreneurs are wondering the same thing.

The reality is that the one strategy which never seems to go out of style, no matter how far back you study the Internet, is that if you want Google to reward your site and bring you those throngs of eager visitors, you must create something of value, something people genuinely want to read and might share with others.

This brings us to SEO Rule #2.

SEO Rule #2: Value Based Content Marketing Never Goes Out of Style

First let's explore the concept of value based content marketing and define what it is, and what it isn't.

What is Value-Based Marketing?

In a nutshell, most experts simplify the driving force behind the Internet as the search for answers to problems or questions. If someone wants to find out the best way to cut a chicken, they search the Internet for articles, recipes and even videos showing how to prepare, cut and even cook the chicken.

This simple act of searching for answers should be an important concept for business owners to grasp, as the goal of their website should be to create and offer the kind of content that answers the questions of potential customers. Chances are that your core product or service solves a problem in someone's life, and your goal should be to focus on helping people find answers to those problems.

In practical terms, this means taking the time to research who your customers are, and then identifying their problems or concerns. Within the industry we use a fancy word for this called "personas" or profiles of the typical types of customers each business has. By identifying those personas you can then do a better job of creating targeted, value based content that they will want to find and actually read.

Let's take an example of a home building company; some of their customers are new families, some are empty nesters. If they want to appeal to both, they should probably create content that explains how their homes are a good fit for either new families or empty nesters. Is the neighborhood low in crime, does it have good schools, or are there patio homes with small yards that would be easy to maintain? All of these would make good, value-based content for a website.

Now, that doesn't mean you have to give away all your trade secrets for free on the Internet. Ideally, you should give your website visitors enough valuable information so that you can demonstrate your expertise, and offer to fix the problem if they are unable to fix it themselves or are looking for a vendor to do so.

What Value-Based Marketing is NOT.

As we discussed earlier, when people find a correlation between what they do and website improvements, it usually leads to doing more of it. And when it comes to content marketing, companies have been trying to write lots of website pages designed specifically for search engines that would get rankings for certain phrases. This practice is ultimately what led Google to the Panda update in the first place as websites put up hundreds or thousands of pages that were written for a specific keyword but offered little or no value to the customer. Yet this is precisely the approach many SEO consulting firms are still taking today!

With this in mind, we can safely say that value-based content marketing is NOT writing pages just for search engines, or just to say you are adding new content to your website. The challenge then becomes to define what constitutes valuable content for your business and your customers, and to set about with the goal of creating that type of content.

SEO Rule #3: Foundational SEO is More Important Than Ever

Foundational SEO – what WSI refers to as Adaptive SEO – addresses to all the little things which create an effective website that is both optimized for search and for users. Let's go into the specifics here:

Full SEO Audit

With all of the changes that have taken place over the last 12 months in the online world, it's a good idea to start with a thorough audit of your website optimization activities. This includes:

- Evaluating the types of content you have on your website and deciding whether you have worthwhile content or if it needs to be improved.
- Checking your website structure for duplicate content, archives, tags and categories which may be hurting your rankings.
- Analyzing your link profile to evaluate whether or not past efforts to gain more links may be holding back your site.

Make Sure Basic SEO Work is Done Correctly

Your website should have good metadata that is different for each page, and ideally that metadata localized for the locations you serve if you have a local business.

On page factors such as H1 and H2 tags and a minimum amount of internal linking should be done properly.

Your address and phone number should be easily visible on each page so website users do not have to go searching for it.

Mobile-Friendly Design

If you have access to a tracking program such as Google Analytics, it's time to look at those numbers to see how your mobile users are doing when they visit your site. If not, the simple test is to pull up your site on a mobile phone and see what the experience is like. Can you find the information you need? What is the load time like? If you are not satisfied with the answers to these questions, it may be time to consider a mobile solution for your site as this does impact search engine optimization.

Evaluate the Components of Your Comprehensive Digital Strategy

It's hard to improve a digital marketing strategy without determining the effectiveness of your current tactics and whether there are gaps and pieces missing.

Personas and special offers. Have you identified the various personas of the typical customers who buy from you, and have you considered creating special offers for each of them?

Service related content and blogging. What types of website content do you have planned for the year? Do you have enough content on your website that covers each of the products or services you offer? If not, consider adding pages as needed, then developing a blogging strategy to provide additional content about those products or services with the goal of adding value and solving problems.

Premium content. In the last year or so, many site owners have turned to creating what we refer to as "premium" content that users might want to download in exchange for an email address, or possibly register for. This type of content usually takes the form of advanced reports, eBooks or even webinars. The type of premium content you produce will be specific to your business, but it can be a valuable addition to your website and very enticing to users who are looking for more detailed information about their problems or concerns.

Social media. Do you have a plan for actively managing your social media presence? This topic requires its own full whitepaper, but it's important to note that Google and other search engines are now looking at social factors in determining how websites rank. In other words, a website that has good related activity on social media accounts is considered more relevant these days than sites that do not have this type of activity.

Email marketing. While not specifically related to SEO, email marketing is still a viable part of digital marketing. Our suggestion is to incorporate email newsletters as part of your overall content and social strategy for best results. For more information on effective email marketing, be sure to download our Email Marketing whitepaper.

Google authorship. This one is relatively new, but is something you should probably look into if you haven't done so already. Google now is tying content from websites to a Google+ account, allowing you to connect your content to your profile with the side benefit of having your photo show up in search results. While the early opinions are mixed about the SEO benefits of Google Authorship, there seems to be no downside to claiming your profile and linking your content as a way to improve your search results.

Develop A Linking Strategy

A dedicated link strategy can go a long way in helping your site rank better, increase traffic and generate more social signals. A dedicated link strategy involves the following:

Link clean up. It's a good idea to do a clean sweep of past links that may be holding your site back. Link removal can be tough, but it's worth the time and effort if you have problem links in your profile.

Claim profiles. Claiming local profiles might be the number one single piece of SEO advice we can give, especially for local business owners. Make sure to claim your free business listings on every major local site you can find, starting with the big ones like Google, Bing, Yahoo, Yelp, Merchant Circle and other similar sites. When you do this, it's important to use a consistent set of data when you build those listings so that search engines find the same address, phone number and website address. This consistency across directories can greatly help with local visibility, especially in the local rankings.

Social profiles. Claim and fill out social profiles such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. While we're not big advocates of claiming hundreds of social profiles just for the sake of doing it, we do recommend claiming the major social profiles so that you can at least claim your spot there, and make sure that the critical data (again phone numbers, website url, etc) are all correct and up to date.

Create great content. Nothing earns links more naturally than great content. Think about any piece of content you've personally shared or linked to – chances are you did so because you found it valuable and believe it will bring value to your social circles. People share content that makes them look smart or funny, even if it's not their own.

Link outreach. Building relationships with other companies and websites that you might potentially develop a partnership with to share content is always a good idea. If you can locate sites that you can contribute content to or exchange information with that usually benefits both parties.

SEO Rule #4: The Rules Will Change

After everything we've seen over the last year, the one thing you could say about the Internet business is that things will continue to change. Search engines like Google will continue to re-define what constitutes a "good quality" website, mobile users will eventually overtake desktop users making the mobile experience all that more important, and social media users will continue to embrace sites like Facebook and Twitter to share their experiences.

We know that as the online experiences change, so will the demands on business owners to change with them and offer users what they want. If you need proof, just think back to what websites were like just a few years ago, and what life was like pre-Facebook. If the changes in that short time frame are any indication, you can expect much more of the same in the coming years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andre Savoie



Andre Savoie is a search and social marketing specialist who has earned certification through WSI's Advanced Internet Marketing Program as well as the Search Engine Academy (taught by John Alexander and Robin Nobles).

He works with clients in the areas of marketing strategy, search engine optimization, pay-per-click marketing and social media technology, such as blogging.