BASIC 101

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO

SEO

(Search Engine Optimization)

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Contents

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Search Engine Landscape

"Never stop testing, and your advertising will never stop improving."
David Ogilvy

Search engines change every day, especially those that have the largest infrastructure and budget to improve their technology. Marketers who understand the need for constant testing to improve their performance will fit in very nicely with the main concept of search engine optimization: Deliver the right content to the right people when they are searching for it.

Search engines explore the Internet constantly looking for new content to index and then use an algorithm to rank that content within "organic," or "free," search results, unlike directories, which simply gather and list Web pages within categories.

In this e-book, you will discover how the search engines collect and subsequently deliver Web assets (pages, images, videos, etc.) to searchers as well as learn the basic tenets of search engine optimization.
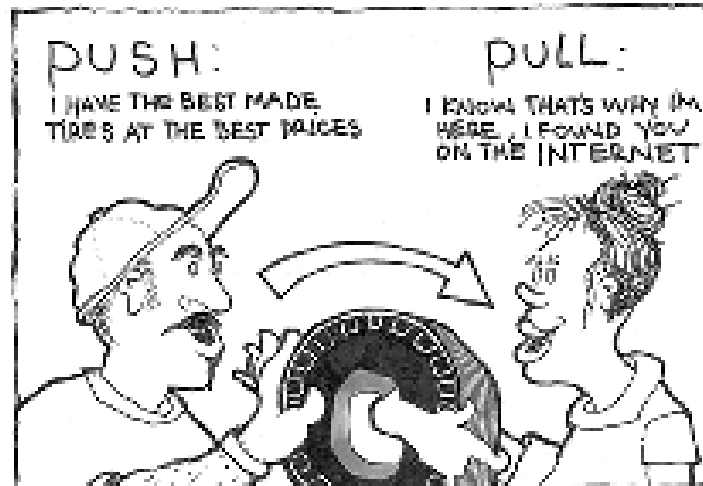
Marketing Classification

Image source: everydaydigitals.com[1]

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[1] everydaydigitals.com/heres-what-i-think/2013/1/8/pull-dont-push-marketing-in-new-media

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SEO is known as a "pull" marketing mechanism because you use SEO to influence the results someone sees within search engine results pages (SERPs). Some will argue that there is an element of "push," especially within very competitive spaces, but we'll cover how to influence people's clicks (CTR, or click-through rate) later in this book. For now, let's look at SEO as **a way to drive awareness of your brand and products/services throughout the buyer's purchase cycle**.

The Search Engine Landscape

Since the early 2000s, Google has been the undisputed leader in the search engine landscape, commanding greater than 60% of the search share in the U.S. marketplace. Google is proud to brag about this in one of their *universal search results,* which are further detailed later in this e-book:

ComScore reports[2]:

17.8 billion explicit core searches were conducted in June (2014), with Google Sites ranking first with 12.1 billion. Microsoft Sites ranked second with 3.4 billion searches, followed by Yahoo Sites with 1.7 billion, Ask Network with 378 million, and AOL Inc. with 231 million.

---

[2] www.comscore.com/Insights/Market-Rankings/comScore-Releases-June-2014-US-Search-Engine-Rankings

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comScore Explicit Core Search Share Report* June 2014 vs. May 2014 Total U.S. – Home & Work Locations Source: comScore qSearch			
Core Search Entity	Explicit Core Search Share (%)		
	May-14	Jun-14	Point Change
Total Explicit Core Search	*100.0%*	*100.0%*	*N/A*
Google Sites	67.6%	67.6%	0.0
Microsoft Sites	18.8%	19.2%	0.4
Yahoo Sites	10.0%	9.8%	-0.2
Ask Network	2.3%	2.1%	-0.2
AOL, Inc.	1.3%	1.3%	0.0

Microsoft's Bing search engine actually powers the organic search results of Yahoo, so SEO practitioners, known by the label of "SEOs," often combine Microsoft and Yahoo's shares, in this case adding up to 29%.

Effective Marketing Within Search Engines

Google has led the way in terms of technology and prowess in the search engine landscape. Therefore, SEOs should always look to Google for clues as to how to best market to searchers. Google has grown to its size by returning *paid search ads* for most queries, costing the advertisers $0.05 to as much as $50 or more each time someone clicks on them. Google also shares these ad units with other publishers, who then share the revenue from the clicks with Google.

Google's quarterly earnings for Q1 2014 were $15.4 billion, up 19% year over year, according to Larry Page, CEO of Google.

The following screenshot shows the difference between paid ad units and "free" organic results:

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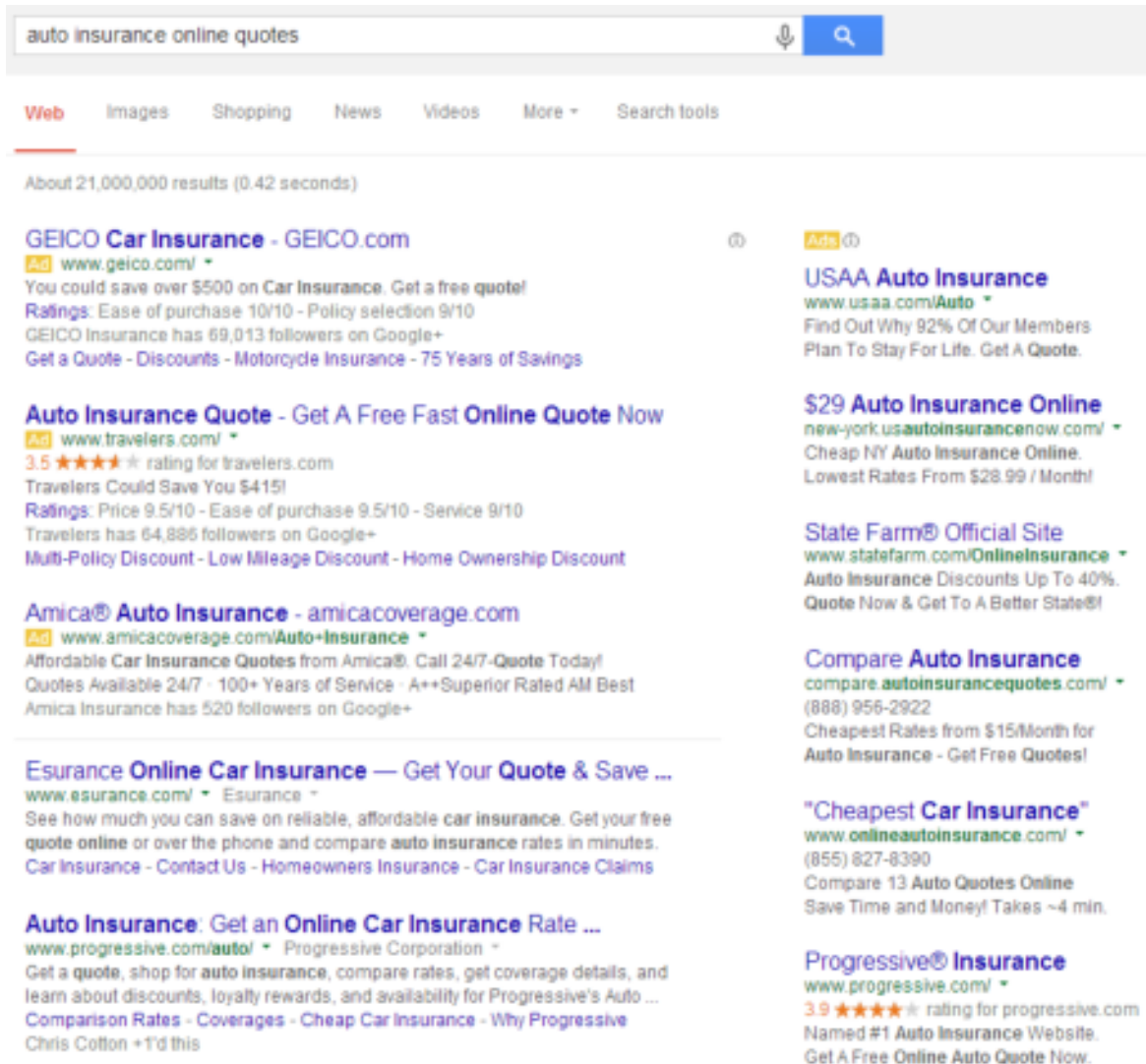
The above image shows the paid search results within the red boxes on the top and side. Even though it may seem like trying for the two non-paid spots is likely to be a fruitless effort, research and tenacity will identify terms that have less advertising and are likely closer to the marketer finishing their purchase decision. Looking at a classic marketing funnel, we know that search (both paid and organic) can be a big part of the consumer decision process throughout the cycle:

6

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Awareness – Brand attention as people start to notice your content for broad search terms indicating initial research

Consideration – Reinforcement of brand authority for those who started above, plus introduction to more sophisticated or topic-knowledgeable searchers who start here

Purchase – Your content has to be here, or you have to hope they search [your brand + product/ service]

Google has provided[3] the following as its guiding ideas, in the form of **"The Ten Things They Know to Be True"**:

1. Focus on the user and all else will follow.
2. It's best to do one thing really, really well.
3. Fast is better than slow.
4. Democracy on the Web works.
5. You don't need to be at your desk to need an answer.
6. You can make money without doing evil.
7. There's always more information out there.
8. The need for information crosses all borders.
9. You can be serious without a suit.
10. Great just isn't good enough.

---

[3] http://www.google.com/about/corporate/company/tenthings.html

Therefore, marketers should also focus on these basic tenets when thinking about SEO. It can be boiled down at a high level as follows, with the details introduced through the rest of this e-book:

1. *Study and understand your market(s), the competitive landscape, and the search terms pertinent to your segment(s).*

2. *Execute SEO technical fixes to ensure that all of your content is properly indexed as well as to strengthen the topical authority of your content and its appeal within search results.*

3. *Engage in ongoing marketing to drive authority and buzz to your content from influencers and brand advocates.*

Final Introductory Thoughts

Remember that even SEO "experts" and "gurus" who have been doing this for years across a number of industries and competitive levels are still learning SEO every day. Constant testing, vigilance, and understanding of search engine and competitive landscape changes are paramount to success.

Use the community to share thoughts and questions about each chapter! Now, let's get into it …

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Chapter 2: Introduction to Universal Search Results

In the "old days" of SEO, marketers were going after a search results page (SERP) that consisted of "ten blue links."

This indicated that there were usually ten listings in the organic results, sometimes surrounded by ads.

These *Classic* SERPs still exist today, such as in the following search for "journal of molecular biology" or the slightly less boring "national documents related to the civil war":

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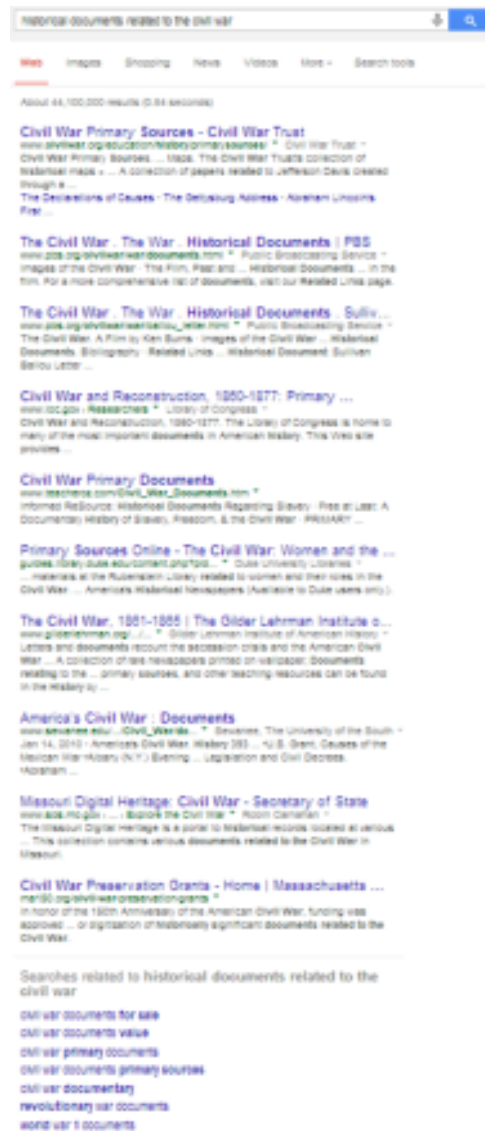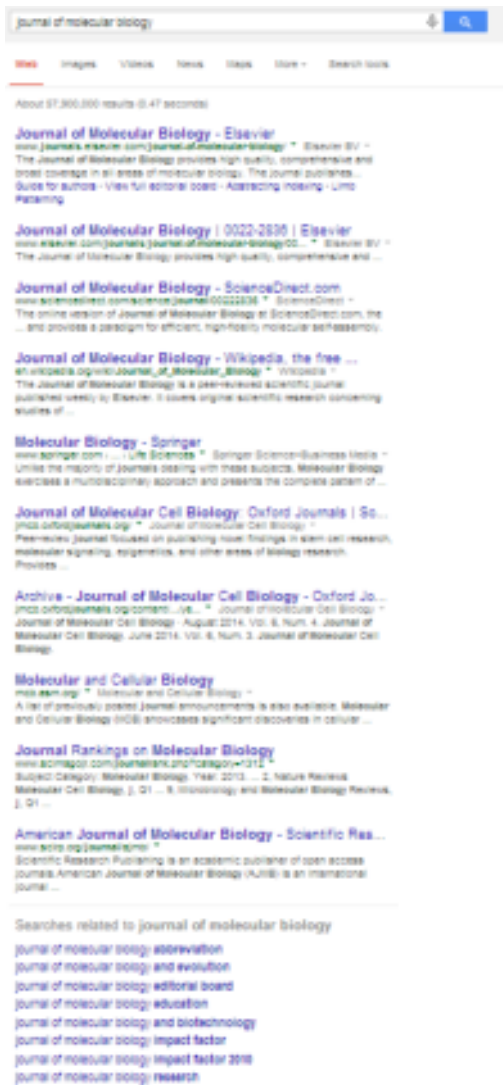
Current search engine optimization techniques require understanding of far more than just how to influence the rankings of HTML text-content pages. Google is now armed with "Google Suggest," which helps you to fill in your search bar with the most-often-searched terms. Typing in "brit," for instance, leads to a #1 suggestion of Britney Spears, long the #1-searched celebrity on the Internet. Her SERP is a great example of the different **kinds of search results that marketers can and should go after,** which we will cover in this chapter.

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Owning the Brand Results

One must-do for marketers is to own the top page of results for your business name. In this case, you can have your company domain(s) as well as other positive third-party entities that you may also own, such as your social media pages, including your blog, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and even Google +, Pinterest, or others depending on your niche or industry. Macy's provides a great example of "owning" the first SERP for their brand:

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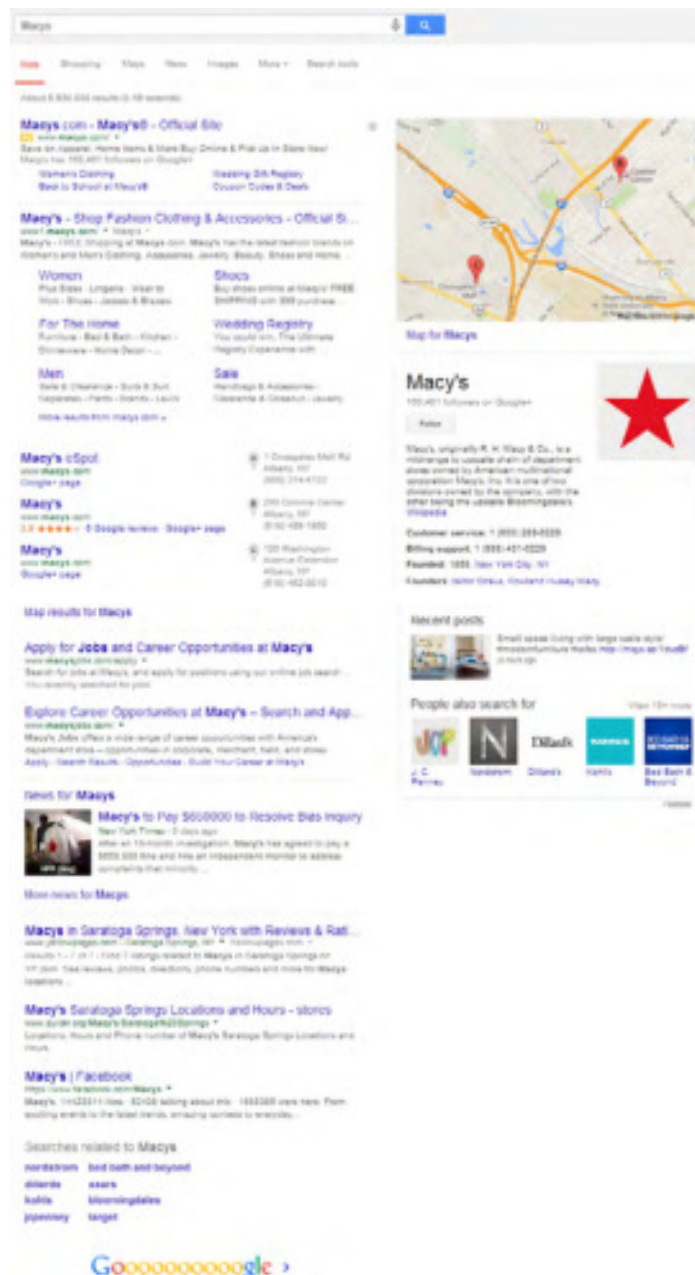
Owning Personal Results

Your own name can also be an important SERP to monitor, if you are a businessperson or owner. SEO can help you rank for positive content that you own, depending on how popular your name is:

Universal Search "Inserts"

Often, Google mixes in Universal Search "units" within the *classic* ten blue links. Bing also uses these types of results, and both search engines insert these results based on **searcher's intent**. Classifying searcher intent is an advanced topic, which we will not cover in this basic introduction to SEO, but **simply defined, it involves Google/Bing using information about past searcher behavior to predict the kind of results a human wants to see**. The following are the most common and can be effectively targeted for inclusion in SEO.

In 2013, Searchmetrics released a study showing the following breakdown of Universal Search Results found in Google U.S.:
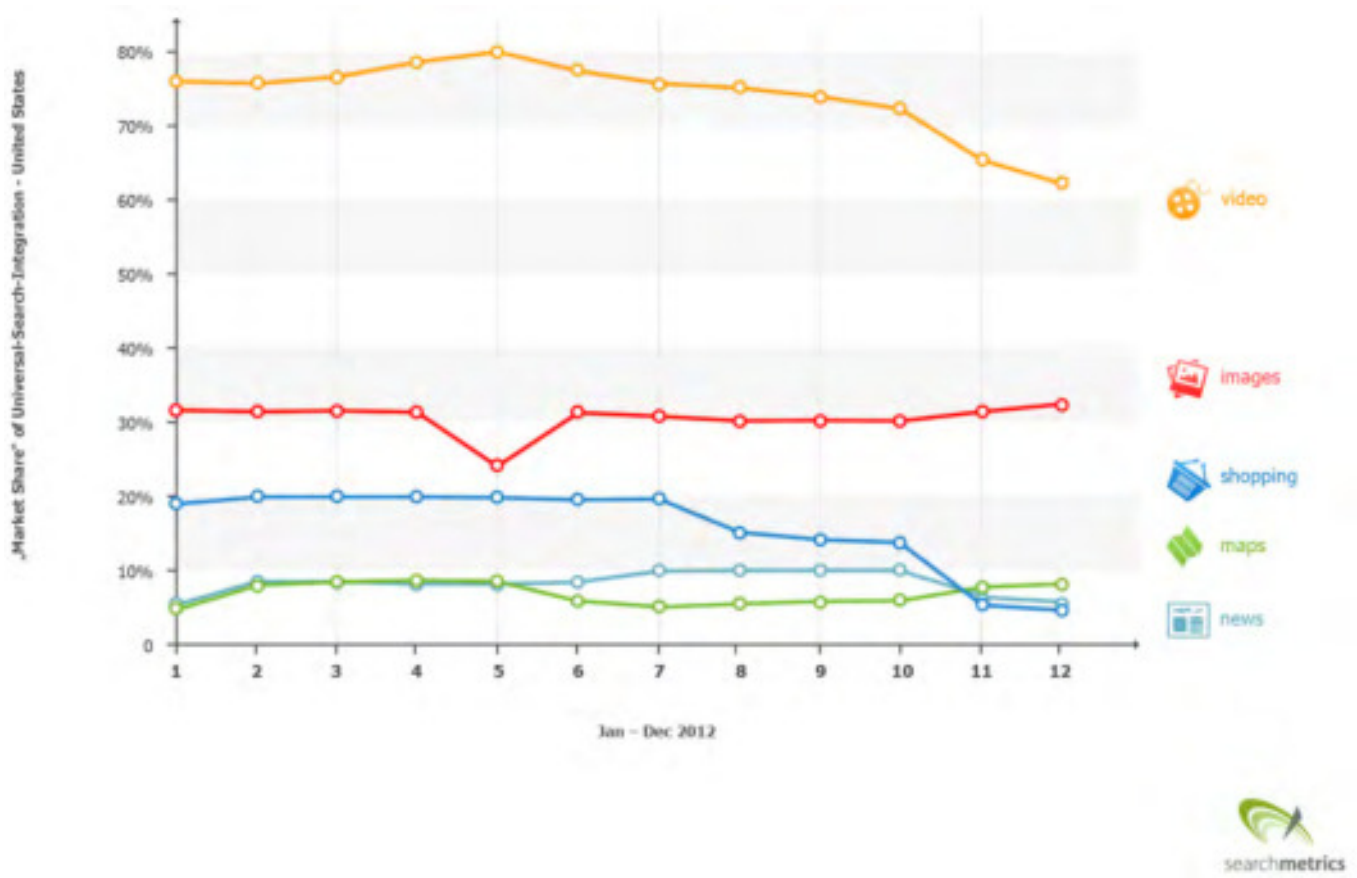
***Note that most Universal Boxes link to a Google category for that type of content (more video, news, images, etc.).

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Video
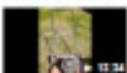
Common for "how to" searches as well as for academic content and brand

Google	Bing

News

If a topic is "hot," this news box tends to move upward in the rankings for both brand- and non-brand-inclusive search terms

Google	Bing

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Images

Many searches lead to user interaction with Google Images results

Google   **Bing**
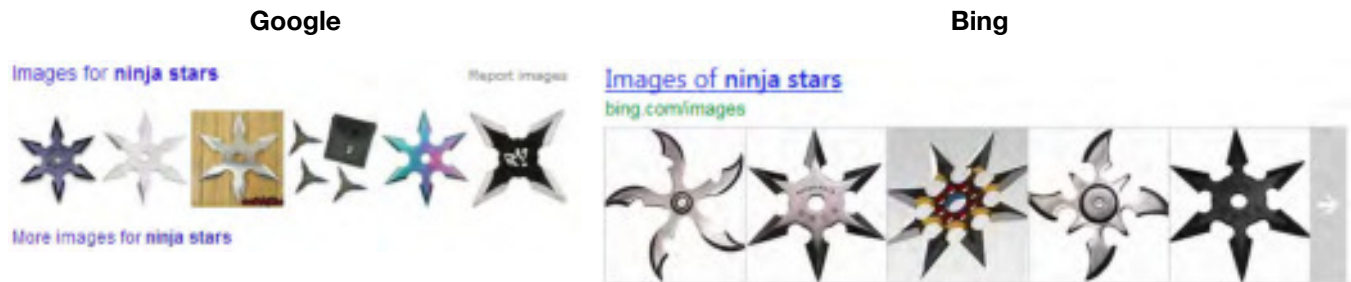
Google: Products (Bing Does Not Have This)

Previously "free" Google Product listings included in the SERPs can also be paid for by advertisers on a per-click basis through Google advertising. These boxes are now most often positioned within the "ad" space, but some examples remain within the organic results, as Google constantly tests to increase click-through rate (CTR), the number of people clicking on the unit as a percentage of the total people exposed to it.

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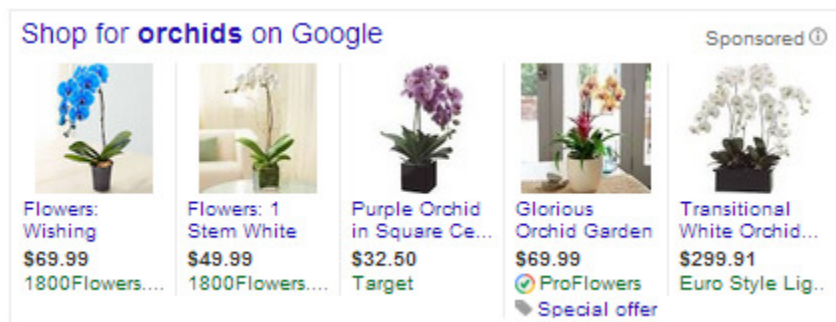
Google Local: Maps

Google will present a map and *classic* "7-pack" of local listings for some types of searches:
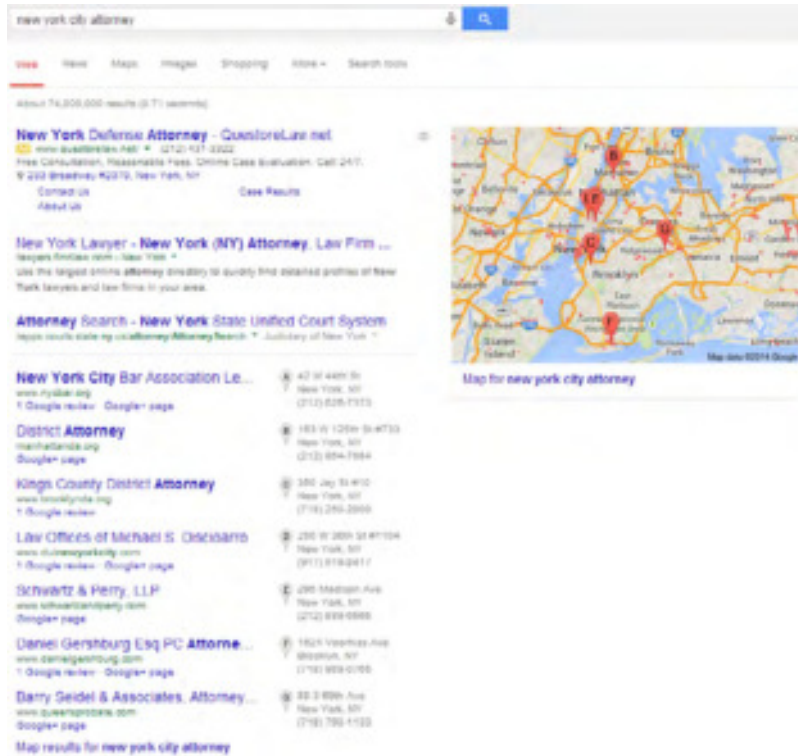
Recently, Google has continued to make changes in the way that it handles local search results. Sometimes, it will list matching establishments at the top of the SERP, such as with restaurants, hair stylists, and other local services. This is known as a "**Local Carousel,**" but many marketers feel it has too many choices, making the job of getting found more difficult.

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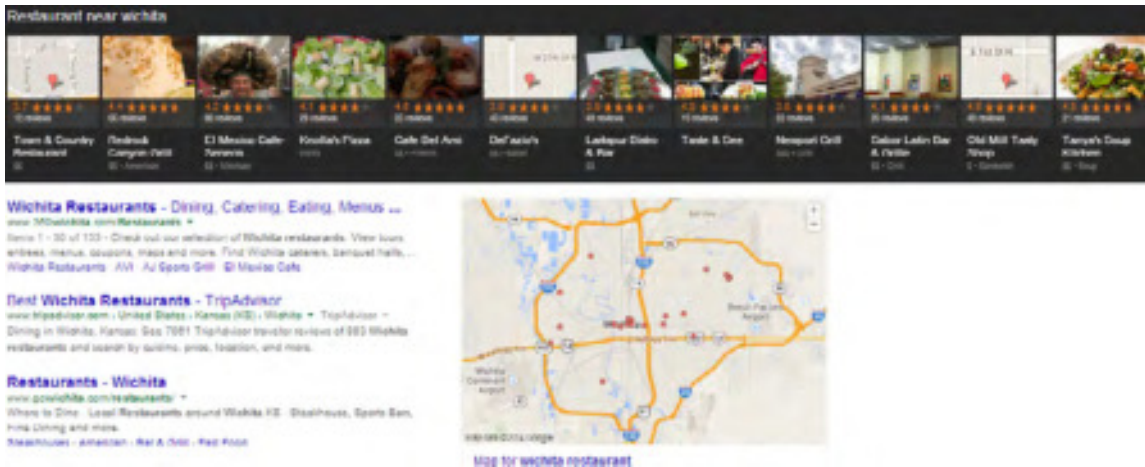
Other "local" terms don't have any map or carousel results, and the SEO's job is to rank pages for the related terms. These cases provide an opportunity for increased visibility since they are back to "ten blue links," but typically, the reason Google has removed the usual local results is because Google feels that the particular niche has a tendency to try to cheat the rankings, and this makes it therefore more competitive and harder to rank.
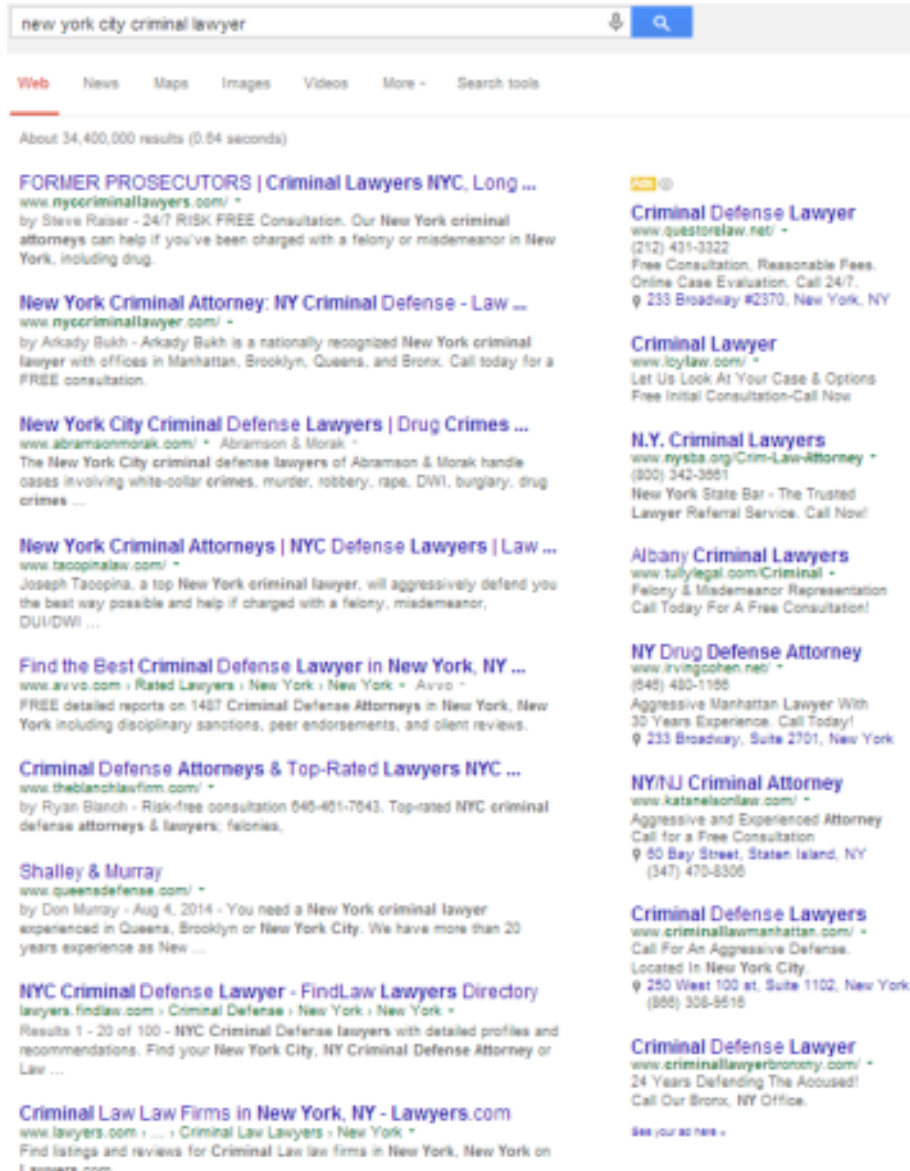
Universal Search "Big Boxes"

There are a few types of Universal Search results that occupy much more space than those listed above and are always prominently displayed so that the searcher will see them "above the fold" (before scrolling down).

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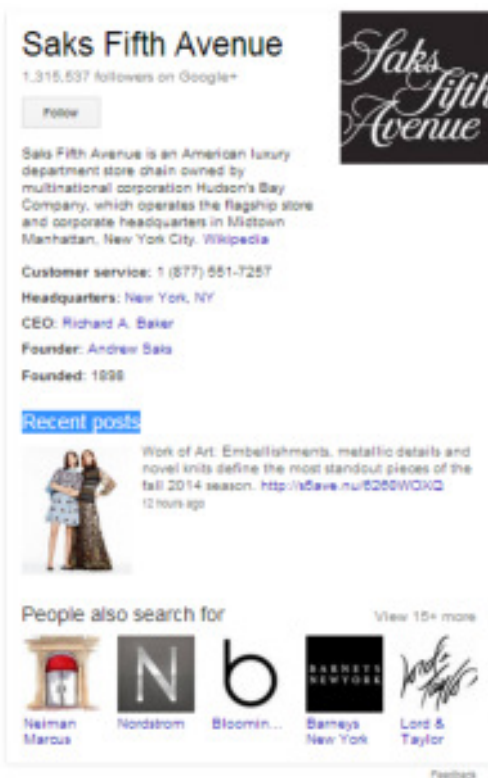
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Knowledge Graph

The Google Knowledge Graph includes content from trusted sources about a specific brand or person. Often, this content comes from Wikipedia, but other trusted sources exist in the case of doctors, scientists, or government officials, for instance.

A special value of the Knowledge Graph for marketers is that you can use your Google+ account to directly post content within the "Recent Posts" section if you have been verified. This allows for real-time messaging and can be very valuable in times of both positive and negative brand chatter.

Additionally, there are some elements of the Knowledge Graph that can be directly influenced by the use of Rich Snippets (an advanced tagging protocol that is used to support SEO as well as branding, since it helps to strengthen descriptions and accuracy of content). Brands themselves can ensure that their own formal logo is used (as opposed to the logo of Saks Fifth Avenue below, which appears to be cut off). Additionally, other content sources can become part of the Knowledge Graph content, including review-enabled sites, music/video content sites, and other validated authority sites on the subject of the particular brand or person.

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Universal Search "Easter Eggs"

There are a number of shortcuts that can lead to additional information being included in a special box right at the top of results. These are often related to timing or score information. Please note that in doing SEO, you should strongly consider what types of searches these types of boxes may appear within and plan accordingly.

Flights

Typing in the flight number can provide "on-time" status
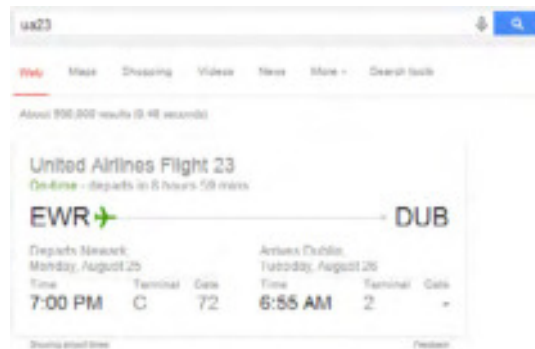
Scores

Interested to know who won the game or when your team is playing?

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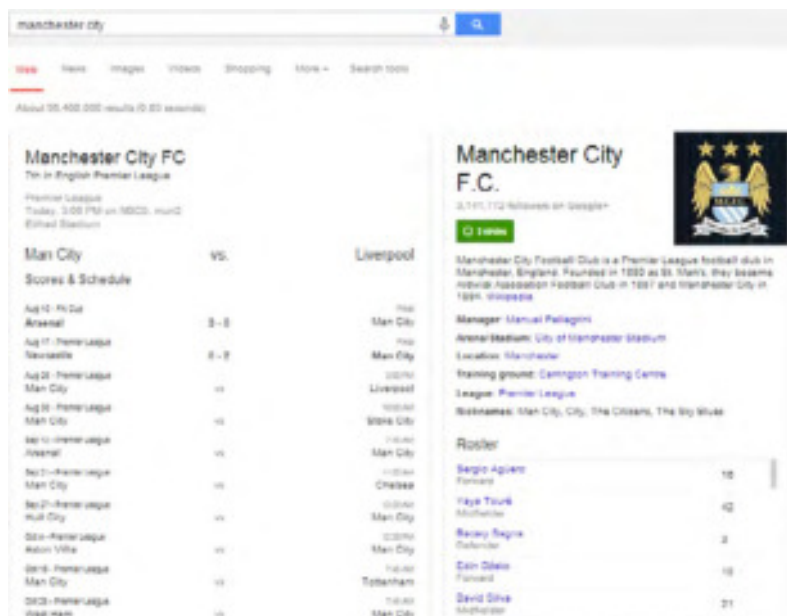
Weather

Calculator

Currency

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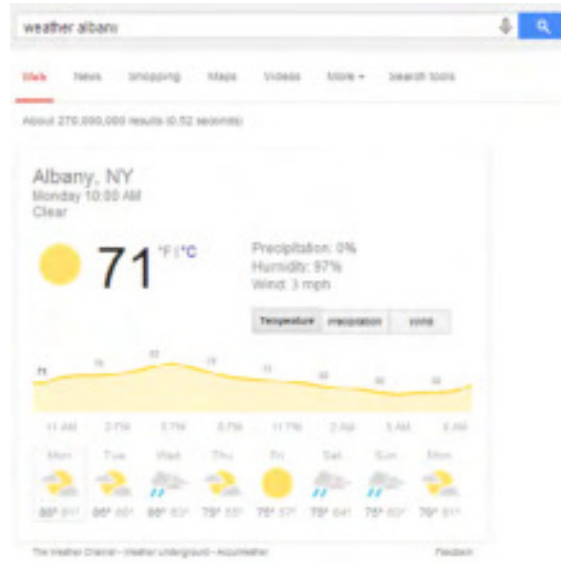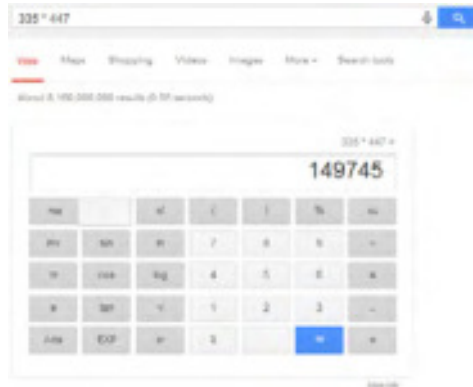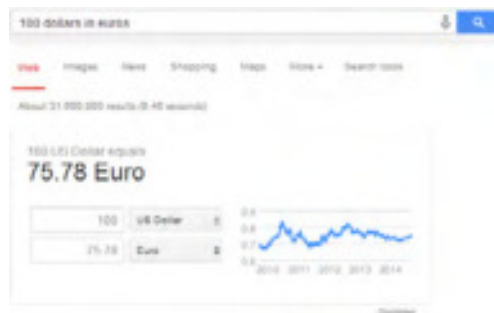
"Meddling" Google

Some industries feel as if Google is threatening their livelihood by stealing content or replacing the content with their own "selection" of paid listings, especially product comparison engines that have been pushed out by Google in favor of their own product listings and a few brands that have highly optimized their pages:
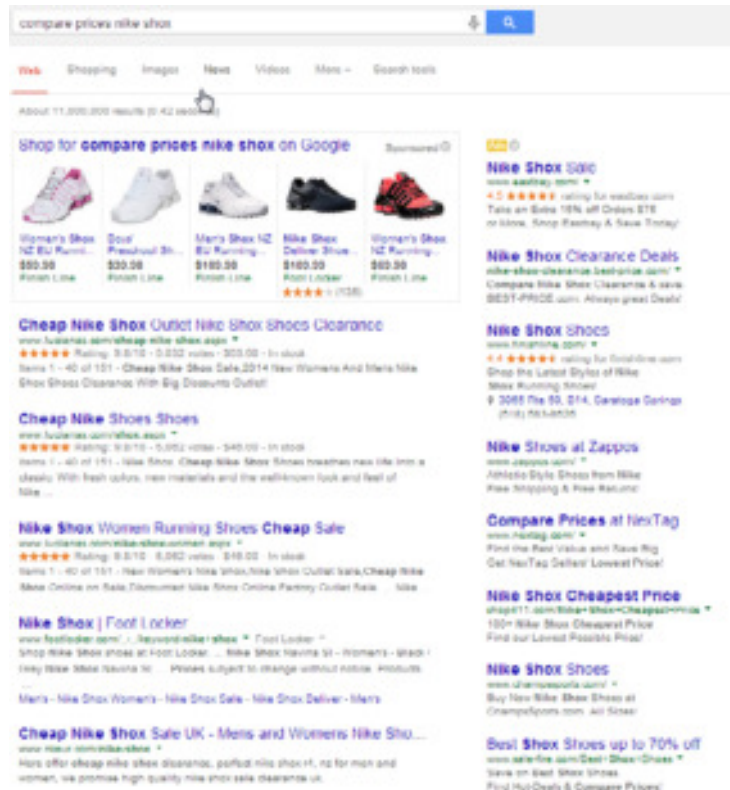
Examples of Google overstepping boundaries and making some search terms less viable for SEOs include:

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Air Travel:

Car Sales:

No longer "live," as Google likely got too much negative feedback from auto dealers:

Conclusion

In 2014 and beyond, marketers have to look at all avenues when it comes to getting content found in search engine results pages. Although HTML-based text content is still the "king" of getting search engines and humans to truly understand your topic and the specific semantic connections to it, other types of content, like images, video, infographics, and more, can help you to stand out from the rest of the competition.

Google rewards those who create content that is shared and cited, and understanding the true makeup of the SERPs for the terms important to your business is a crucial starting point to long-term SEO success.

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Chapter 3: How Search Engines Find Content and Return Results

Google and Bing and most other sophisticated search engines accomplish two primary goals:

1. "Crawl" the Internet to index content (text and digital assets) to store in an "index" database

2. Leverage an algorithm to determine which results to return for a searcher's query, based on likely intent of the searcher, content relevance, and content authority

Crawling the Internet

Google is the largest search engine in the world and has created an index of content found on the Internet with its army of "user agents," also known as "spiders" and "crawlers" and formally known as "Googlebot." Both Google and Bing use "agents" to crawl through the Internet by means of links on Web pages and within the code of digital assets. The following diagram explains this process:

The search engine spider crawls hyperlinks on Web pages and compiles a list of pages to be stored in the search engine index.

The Internet is made up of many Web servers that host billions of Web pages.

The search engine's index contains encoded data about Web addresses and what words are associated with each page.

When a user performs a search through the search engine, a sophisticated algorithm is applied to the index and it returns all appropriate Web pages in ranked order - from most to least relevant.

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The HTTP Process for Search Engines
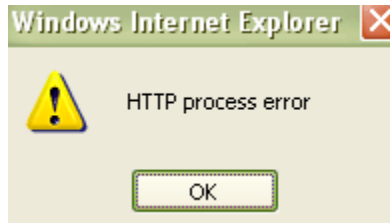
Currently, the speed at which a site loads for a user (human or crawler) is very important when it comes to SEO. As we will detail further in this e-book, technical SEO also includes helping the site to perform optimally for search engines. "HTTP process" is a technical term for *the things that need to happen in order for one user (human or robot) to "see" the content that is hosted on a website*.

For higher "speed" in this process, there are a few basic elements that SEOs like to consider. For each of the following possible improvement areas, the SEO team/owner may need to negotiate or compromise with the IT, design, or development teams in order to gain ground. *With all technical SEO recommendations, it is extremely important to "play nicely" with IT and understand their limitations based on system/hardware.* Compromises usually end up helping both teams out as well as improving the overall user experience.

Improving the HTTP process for SEO can include:

- Decreasing page load time by removing "heavy" code or optimizing image files and locations and hosting externally

- If using templates from CMS providers like WordPress, using a faster-loading template and plugins to better prepare the site for SEO

  - Other size/speed-focused tools available include gzip compression and cache-controlling plugins

For this basic SEO introduction, the above is about as far as you need to understand in order to research the right topics for your personal situation(s).

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Using an Algorithm to Return Results

Once the search engine has indexed content, it becomes eligible to be returned in the search results. Google and Bing use an algorithm that is primary made up of two factors that help to determine if a text or digital asset merits inclusion: relevance and authority. These factors, coupled with a search engine's interpretation of the searcher's intent when performing the search, determine the makeup of the resulting SERP.

1. Relevance: This has to do with how close the topic of the content is to the search.

2. Authority: Historically, Google invented the first way to determine a Web asset's authority by measuring the amount of links pointed to or "citing" the asset. The more it has, in general, the better the content is, shown by its popularity.

    a. This has been and continues to be problematic for search engines because of the nature of marketers and their desire to use shortcuts to get to the top of the rankings. More will be covered on this subject later in this e-book.

Note that technical considerations make up part of the algorithms as well, but we cannot really know how important site speed is in the algorithm calculations, especially when compared to the other list of specific content elements that could rank for the specific term, on a case-by-case basis. But we do know that improving a site's technical accessibility does correlate with increased and/or improved rankings.

All of the above information about authority and content relevance with be further discussed in this e-book in greater detail, but first, let's look more deeply at how search engines use their algorithms to rank content

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Chapter 4: How Search Engines Rank Text Content and Digital Assets

We spoke in the last chapter about the basics of relevance and authority. In this chapter, we will learn more specifically how search engines choose to rank content in returning a search and how the following each come into play:

1. Relevance and authority

2. Content or page "quality"

3. User intent/types of searches

4. The building blocks of SEO

The High-Level Elements of Ranking: Relevance and Authority
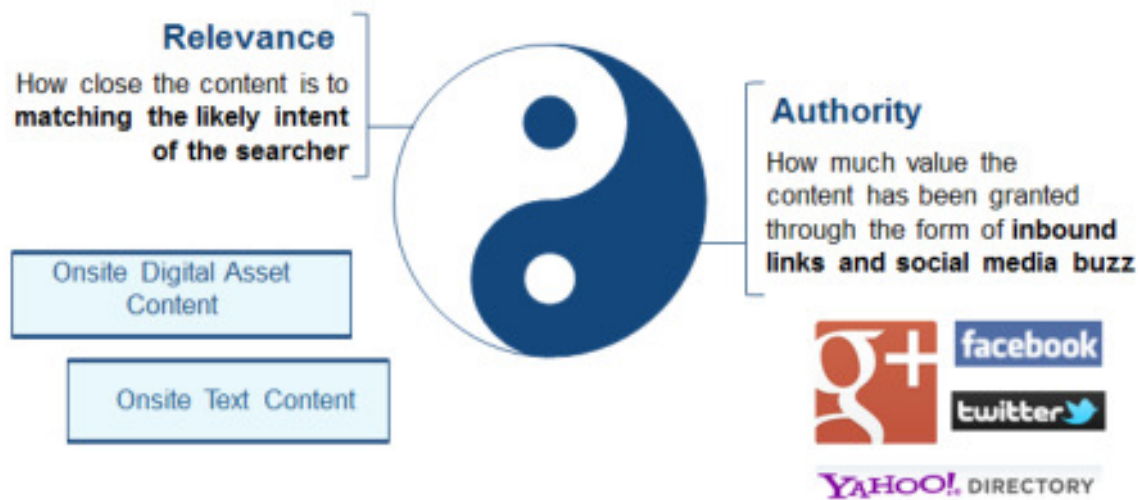
As previously described, content must be relevant to a query in order to be part of the possible list of returned links, and the authority of the content helps to determine how highly it ranks.

1. In some cases, this is easy for a search engine to figure out, such as if someone searches for "auto insurance quotes." This becomes more difficult to determine for a search engine the broader the term becomes. If someone just searches for "insurance" or "insurance quotes," part of the information is missing, and therefore, the results set will likely include information for other types of insurance other than automotive.

    a. It can be especially problematic for search engines if the word has more than one commonly used interpretation, like "windows" for both the computer software and glass windows. Also, it can be difficult if the search is both a brand name and a common search term, like "health insurance quotes," for example (Healthinsurancequotes.com).

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(Search Engine Optimization)

Using a modifier like "deductibles" changes the landscape of results completely from sales-focused to educational plus a few sales tries.	A search for "windows" returned a paid result on top for glass but a Microsoft subdomain home page including additional links.

insurance deductibles

Web   News   Images   Shopping   Videos   More ▾   Search tools

About 5,660,000 results (0.41 seconds)

Progressive Car **Insurance** - Progressive.com
Ad www.progressive.com/ ▾
3.9 ★★★★☆ rating for progressive.com
Named #1 Car **Insurance** Website. Get A Free Online Quote Now.
Progressive Insurance has 133,330 followers on Google+

    Renters Quote   Auto Quote
    Motorcycle Quote   Boat Quote

How do **deductibles**, coinsurance and copays work? - Blue ...
www.bcbsm.com/...**insurance**...**insurance**.../**deductibles**-coinsurance-copa... ▾
This page defines the common terms **deductible**, coinsurance and copay, and ...
This information will help you if you're shopping for health **insurance** and have ...
How to understand ... - How do out-of-pocket ... - What is coinsurance?

Deductible | HealthCare.gov
https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/**deductible**/ ▾ HealthCare.gov ▾
The amount you owe for health care services your health **insurance** or plan covers ...
For example, if your **deductible** is $1,000, your plan won't pay anything until ...

Deductible - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/**Deductible** ▾ Wikipedia ▾
Jump to Auto and property **insurance** - [edit]. In a typical automobile **insurance**
policy, a **deductible** will apply to claims arising from damage to or loss of the ...
Deductible vs. franchise - Deductible vs. excess - Auto and property insurance

HowStuffWorks "How **Deductibles** and Co-pays Work"
health.howstuffworks.com/health-**insurance**/**deductible**-copay.htm ▾
Deductibles and co-pays are the two basic elements to any health care plan. Learn
about the difference between health **insurance deductibles** and co-pays.

Deductible Definition | Investopedia
www.investopedia.com/terms/d/**deductible**.asp ▾ Investopedia ▾
The amount you have to pay out-of-pocket for expenses before the **insurance** ... into

windows

Web   News   Images   Shopping   Maps   More ▾   Search tools

About 788,000,000 results (0.50 seconds)

Windows At Lowe's® - Lowes.com
Ad www.lowes.com/ ▾
Shop Lowe's® For Top Brand **Windows** & Stylish Treatments & Save Today!
Ratings: Prices 10/10 - Selection 9.5/10 - Website 9/10 - Returns 9.5/10
Lowe's Home Improvement has 566,347 followers on Google+
⦿ 10 Lowe's Drive, Saratoga Springs, NY - (518) 583-3777

    Lowe's Credit Services   Weekly Ads
    Labor Day Savings   Free Shipping $49+

Windows - Microsoft **Windows**
windows.microsoft.com/ ▾ Microsoft Windows ▾
The official website for the Microsoft **Windows** operating system. Explore **Windows**
information, get downloads, and find the latest PCs for **Windows**.

Downloads   Support
Buy Windows and get free   Get help, support, and tutorials for
downloads such as Internet ...   Windows products—Windows 8 ...

Windows 8.1   Microsoft Windows Update
The new Windows is here. Get   Latest bug fixes for Microsoft
Windows 8.1 now for better ... Windows, including fixes for ...

Windows 7   Windows PCs and Tablets
Upgrade to Windows 8.1 - Invalid The new generation of Windows 8.1
product key - Fix printer problems tablets, laptops, and 2-in-1 ...

More results from microsoft.com »

Content Quality

Google and Bing are very vocal about promoting content that is of high quality. Although all major search engines occasional fail and let poor content get through, for the most part, the importance of creating high-quality content has increased over the years. This includes both text content and non-text content, often referred-to as digital assets, such as video, images, infographics, quizzes, and more.

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In short, poor-quality content filled with repetitive text or specific keywords, which used to at one point rank well, will be doomed to fail. Marketers and their SEO side must come to grips with creating good content, even if it seems that they have the most boring industry in the world.

In the following examples, we find a team in Pennsylvania that took its grease-absorbing mats and turned them into "pig gold," as well as some top ten topics that make legal sites seem cool (to search engines, at least, thanks to the few who get a chuckle out of them and share them online – more on that later!).

Newpig.com uses the pig motif to catch and retain customers and ranks very well for absorbent mats.

For law sites that focus on "legal technology," having content such as top ten lists related to industry topics (like Big Data, in this case), could lead to better rankings for key targeted terms.

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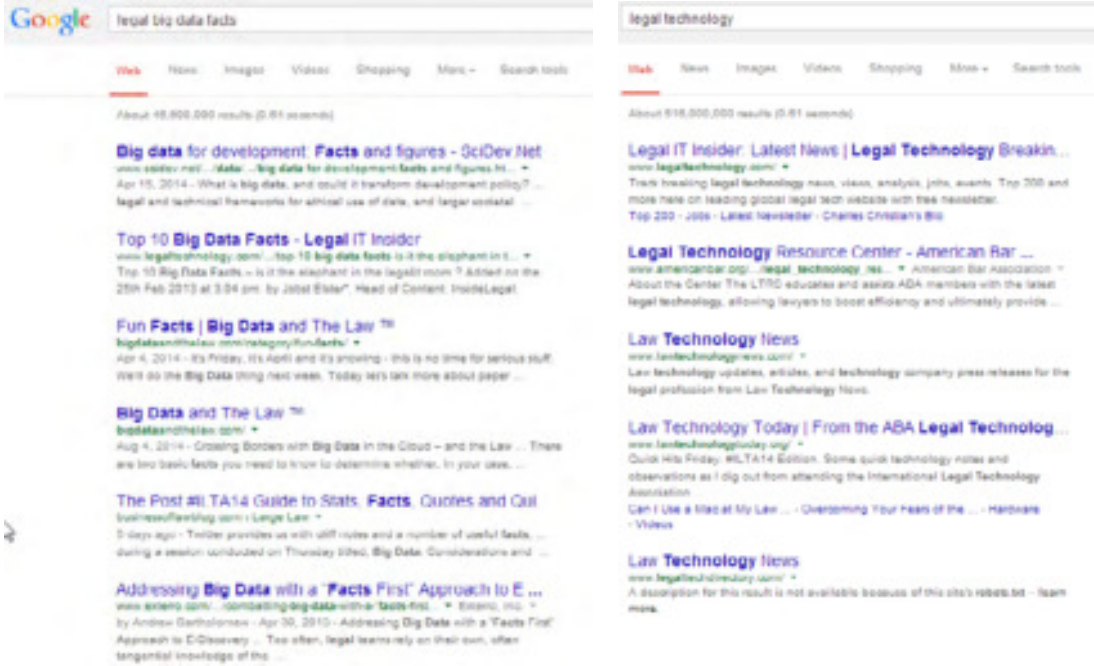
Conversely, poor sites that repeat content over and over can no longer perform successfully in search results. Google outlines a number of these types of "poor quality" assets in its Webmaster Tools help section called "Follow Our Guidelines."[4]

The following is an example of how the "Irrelevant Keywords" page appeared in mid-2014:

---
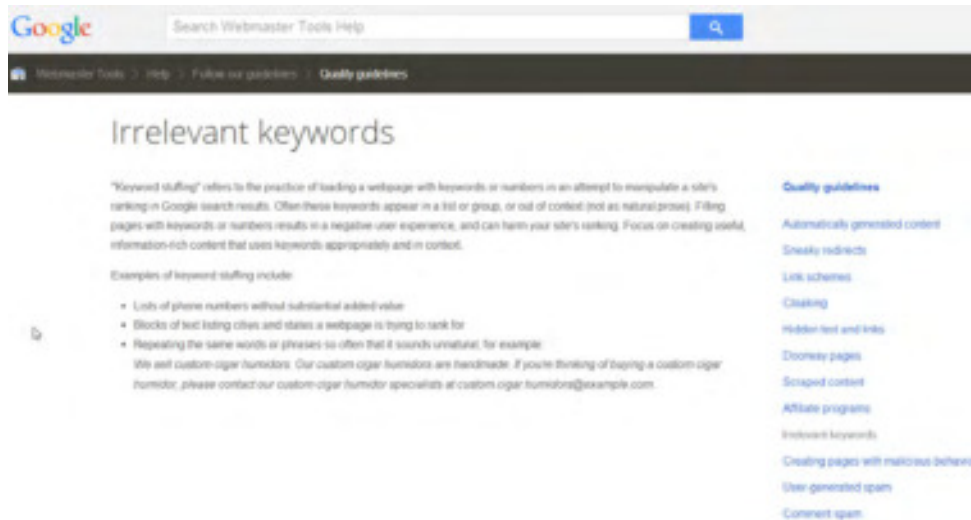
[4] https://support.google.com/webmasters/topic/6001981?hl=en&ref_topic=3309300

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User Intent

Before we outline the basic steps required to "perform" SEO in an ongoing programmatic manner, one more nuance must be discussed in regard to the algorithm: **USER INTENT**

User intent is a complicated factor but has been generally boiled down to the following:

Most searchers have one of three goals in mind: navigational, informational, or transactional.

Understanding "Navigational" Searches

Someone *interested in navigating to a brand* will likely type the brand name and may even add a specific category or service, such as "Foot Locker basketball" or "Geico motorcycle." In recent years, Google has given more and more "property" to the brand site for term such as this, when in the past, they would give additional links below the first result but allow interlopers into the next above-the-fold spots.

Successful SEOs have to **own their own brand searches**. As is also evident in the screenshots below, many strong brands will buy a paid search ad even for a search that they know will be dominated by their own organic results.

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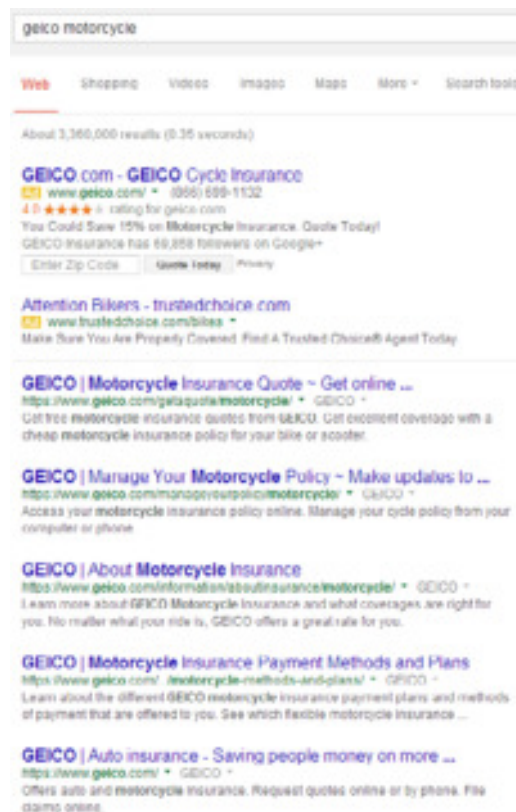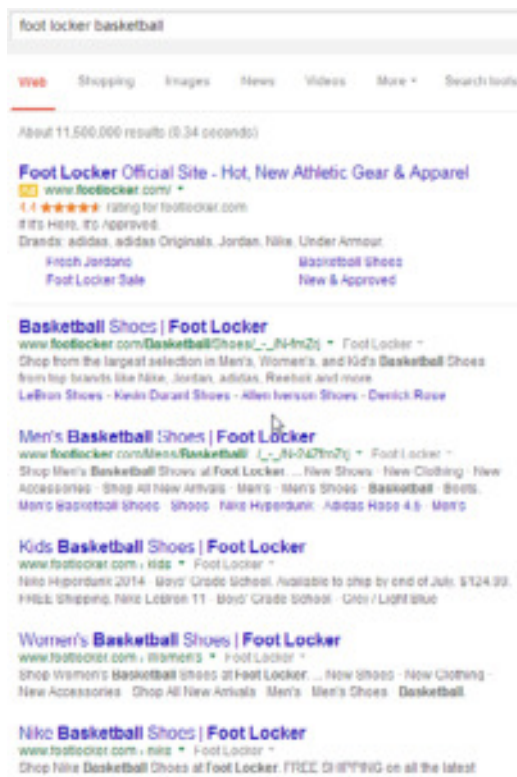
Understanding "Informational" Searches

Someone *interested in finding out information about something* will likely perform a number of searches that will become increasingly more detailed. These types of searches make up many of the overall searches and can lead to the user being satisfied with the information they found or to the searcher making a subsequent *transactional* search (discussed below).

Search engines like to think that they are "at their best" when it comes to trying to meet the needs of someone seeking information, and therefore, many informational searches have a variety of universal results. However, recent improvements in computational power touted by Google (including during the Google Hummingbird update) and Bing claim that as a user performs a series of searches, the search engine adapts and begins to take past searches into account. As of this writing, it is nowhere near perfect.

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Understanding "Transactional" Searches

Someone *interested buying something* will usually perform very specific product or service searches, sometimes accompanied by a brand. For SEO, the transactional search is the Holy Grail. Over the history of the profession, most of the aggressive attempts to cheat the system and gain rankings for high-value terms have been targeted toward searches that have a specific transaction in mind

Transactional terms can be "evergreen" or seasonal. Some are even event-based, and others are driven by pop culture or sudden increases in buzz around a specific product or service-type. The key to understanding which searches are transactional lies in the ability to track visitors to their end purchase and be able to see what keyword they came to the site using. Unfortunately, Google took away the ability for marketers to see the exact keyword through analytics, so now SEOs use third-party tools to track how people search. This topic will be covered later in this e-book.

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Basic SEO: Technical, Content, and Linking

Over the years, search engine optimization has been about three things:

1. Getting content indexed = Technical SEO

2. Optimizing the content for relevance as well as appearance within the search results = Content or "on-page" SEO

3. Getting authority pointed to the content = Brand links and social mentions

Some SEOs look at this as a silo or hierarchical relationship toward a common goal of increased visibility within results pages for terms that are navigational, informational, and, most importantly, transactional.

Assets need links

Content optimization includes creating text and non-text assets that are relevant to the site's topic and will be seen as quality content.

Technical SEO, the foundational element that allows content to be indexed. Technical SEO can also be used to increase site speed and performance as well as to further strengthen pages and assets with file names and descriptive coding.

In the upcoming chapters, we will look more closely at each of the above areas. Please subscribe to the updates.

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