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Early Release

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The SEO Battlefield

WINNING STRATEGIES FOR SEARCH MARKETING PROGRAMS

Anne Ahola Ward

Mastering the SEO Battlefield

Anne Ahola Ward

Beijing • Boston • Farnham • Sebastopol • Tokyo

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The SEO Battlefield

by Anne Ahola Ward

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Welcome to the Battlefield

Virtual war wages every day. Dynasties rise and fall on the heels of search engine algorithm changes. What you're fighting for in terms of SEO ground isn't actually ground; it's quicksand.

The way a company appears in search can alter its course and determine outcomes. When search is not properly minded, a company puts itself at risk; competition can swoop in, reputations get tarnished. By neglecting to update your company's information online, it can funnel people incorrectly to your competitors or bad actors.

Introduction

The practice of search engine optimization is inherently competitive *yet* fair because nobody maintains top positions forever. Change is an uninterrupted force. Search is akin to a battlefield, because SEO warriors must continually empire-build or risk losing it all. Companies rarely maintain search prominence without sagacious exertion and commitment. Just like life and love, search is a battlefield.

Wake early if you want another man's life or land. No lamb for the lazy wolf. No battles fought in bed.

-The *Hávamál*, Old Norse

Coveted search rankings do not happen by accident. If you want to rank in the top entries consistently, you must work tirelessly. Exalted kings of search are seldom if not rare. If you're some kind of search legend, like Prince or Bowie or (gasp) Kim Kardashian, or maybe you get caught in a (hopefully) positive news cycle, you could get lucky. But do you really want to depend on luck?

How do we define search? Searching signals *the intention to explore information* via search engine. Search can do so much for us; make fortunes, help convict murderers,

connect lost relatives and manipulate elections (*vis a vis* season 3, House of Cards). To understand and then anticipate what people will explore online seems like magic for some people. There's no magic in SEO, it only seems that way from the outside because the actions taken are completely unpredictable. Search is the gateway to the bounteous information held within the web, the Giant Global Graph and thus the internet as a whole.

Building a successful SEO program means being realistic about your resources, automating what you can when you can and experimenting all of the time. Try to learn from those experiments. The thing about having gumption is that it's presence does not guarantee successful outcomes. SEO programs are doomed to fail when they don't quickly recognize what's **not working** or get bogged down in minutia, but hey that's more billable hours, right? (kidding!)

Search optimization continues to happen everywhere- whether or not you take notice. When you're searching for something as simple as a person's name it's fairly rare to not see various social media listings dominating page one. Sites like Facebook, Yelp or LinkedIn easily own the top search listing on a search engine result page (SERP) for a person's name or business. If a person is not internet-active then arbitrageurs or sites like Spokeo and White Pages will successfully rank for their name. Common names often have expanded paid and organic results: listings pages on LinkedIn or paid ads for background checks, alumni or finding public records.

You can lose significant ground to a competitor for a highly lucrative search term if you do not invest in SEO, or at least stay aware of it. It's imperative to remain aware of how you appear online in today's business world and the vast majority of society. One scenario that can happen if you do not pay attention to your site's SEO is that an arbitrager will creep into the space. Arbitrageurs work to rank for what *you* want to rank for and then sell it back to you (or *anyone* else who will pay). Arbitrageurs are like ghost ships who play an expensive game of monopoly. I've seen very expensive online usurping happen to companies who lag behind and it's an unfortunate price to pay for a slow market reaction time.

In order to grow a website's presence, constant effort must be expended. Elements of both offense and defense strategies should co-exist symbiotically within all search programs. SEOs and Growth Hackers *alike* make moves with poles apart tactics and maneuvers. Everyone can make a place on the virtual chess search board. What **you** choose to do about it is up to you. I say **own it**.

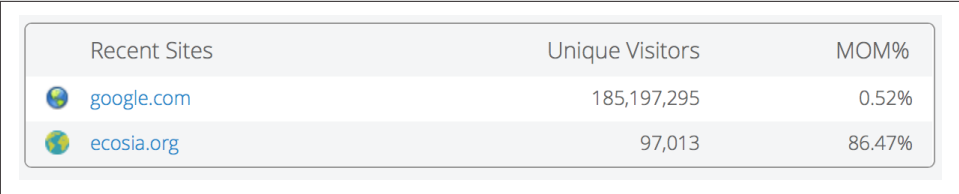
Organizations with a lack of SEO mindfulness can easily become dependent on costly paid search traffic for revenue. Paid traffic takes many forms: affiliate marketing, retargeting, geo-local-mobile, etc. Paid is not a contradistinctive force to organic search. There are many fiscal benefits to paid search when it is done right, especially retargeting or social. Mixing organic and paid search can yield interesting fruits. There are different areas of battle, prepare for all paths: instead of one if by

land, two by sea, the true professional covers both. Diversification of promotional assets allows for the deepest penetration. It's been shown countless times that it helps users to gain trust when they see a company name mentioned twice or more in a search result.

There are more search engines and methods for a site to be found than a simple Bing search. Worrying about only one engine and method of search feels like the easiest thing to do, but that's not necessarily the best. Many SEO programs fail because they forget to diversify. For example, I've been watching this new socially focused eco-good browser Ecosia take off slowly but surely since 2013. Ecosia is fun to use and returns generally useful results. I love that my search queries are planting trees! I'm at 1758 and counting.

In 2016 Ecosia's traffic feels insignificant statistically if Google is the only foil for success. A portion of the proceeds on Ecosia's ads go towards planting trees in Africa and beyond, they surpassed 4 million trees in early 2016. The ads platform runs on Yahoo! and Bing's network. It all started when CEO and founder of Ecosia, Christian Kroll read a book about the importance of rainforests and decided he had no choice but to take action. He started Ecosia's predecessor Forestle, which was managed in partnership with Google. The project took off and started to take flight quickly. Then it shut down suddenly.

The stories are markedly different about Forestle's demise, but many agree it was a success. Some people believe that project Forestle's success is precisely why partnership with Google abruptly ended. Years later Kroll started Ecosia with the same mission as Forsetle, to raise funds to tackle the problem of deforestation. Many people are starting to notice this engine. It doesn't pay to ignore seedlings, anything can happen. The internet is a magical place.





Recent Sites	Unique Visitors	MOM%
 google.com	185,197,295	0.52%
 ecosia.org	97,013	86.47%

Figure 1-1.

David vs. Goliath?

Right column shows growth month over month, April 2016

Yes, **Ecosia** is based on Bing right now, but anything could happen. There are many rising stars in tech. New empires will form in search. Entirely new platforms and methods of search will start to exist and evolve with the proliferation of IoT and the Nth screen

. Vigilant search mavens don't take what's handed to them on industry blogs, they seek out and watch the Christian Kröll's of the world; because he could be the next Steve Jobs. Search can be text, voice, images or video and that's about to change. It's one of the most exciting times to perform search optimization! The more screens and connectivity we see, the more important our SEO existence will become. Companies will always need experts to help them navigate ways to present themselves on the web, **SEO is here to stay.**

Now that we've talked moon shots, ok fine, let's talk about the Google. We know a few things about Google's founders. We know that Larry Page is an academic at heart with a penchant for relevance. The inspirations are coming from library science amongst other new hipper AI methodologies. Throughout my entire frisking career the one concept that's always held true to the core was bibliometrics, otherwise known as citation analysis.

Think of bibliometrics in practice for SEOs akin to a research paper for University academics. The central concept for relevant search results is finding what we want through a feeling obtained by credible authority. When you're thinking about who should link back to your site, think about who you'd want a referral from in *real* life. If you want a summer internship at the hottest startup in town, who would you ask? Probably not your tennis coach! You'd be more likely to ask your science or math teacher(s) for the referral, because it would be more credible.

Achieving relevance is our guiding principal, not the dissection of AI concepts. Be useful, be thoughtful to your site visitors and you'll succeed. Search algorithm obsession is not the safest place for an SEO to stay mentally. Living in fear of updates to core rankings means *you're doing it wrong*. It's not useful to anticipate penalization as a means to avoid it. Virtually every SEO has an algorithm update horror story to tell.

One of Google's algorithm updates was coined *Panda* back in 2011. The update sought to downgrade poor quality content from search results. Panda hurt many warehouse-style sites that were basically crude content and linking farms. Some SEOs cried for days, because we could no longer 'power it out.' Things took a more complicated turn. Updates were then made to Panda periodically and sporadically thereafter. Panda's formal inclusion in the **core algorithm** was announced in January 2016.

Rolling Panda into the core signifies the move towards AI and machine learning for the engine's algorithm itself. So meta! Once an update gets rolled into the core algorithm it then runs by itself and no longer needs *any* testing or maintenance.

As the old adage says, paranoia will destroy ya. Don't worry about each tiny update, look at the groupings, otherwise you're chasing ghosts. Google has publicly urged webmasters and SEOs to not fixate on each individual component of their core algorithm:

For a user or even a webmaster it should not matter at all which components live where, it's really irrelevant, and that's why I think people should focus on these 'interesting' things less.

-Gary Illyes Webmaster trends analyst, Google.

Practice Areas of SEO

What does the search optimization program cover? It's necessary to understand what marketing activities relate to SEO. When the search program doesn't have reach into the right areas, the program can be rendered ineffective. An SEO unable to directly influence changes made to the website runs a powerless program. Web development is one of the most important pieces of an SEO program in 2016. Users will no longer tolerate slow performance of a website.

It's important to first examine what search engine optimization areas will need oversight for an SEO program. There are two audiences for search to consider: carbon based life forms and the artificially intelligent computational silicon ones, too. When building or maintaining a search program it's paramount that all of the pieces of marketing work together. like clockwork. Things are never cookie cutter when it comes to SEO, so simple that one small tweak could conquer all. Search practices and traditional marketing efforts done in concert yield the maximal results.

Countless people have asked me the same question over the years that boils down to: *what is the silver SEO bullet?* They want some hot tip that they think is a secret to their search success. Depending on my mood I'll answer something like, "*be interesting*" or "*get faster.*" One cannot simply un-sheath magical daggers to slay search engine dragons. There is no tip I could give that would tangibly help a person further their search domination. No matter how much fun I've had with my responses people often seem disappointed (if they do not chuckle). There is never one single *piece of hot goss*, i.e. some big secret that's going to take you over the top without meaningful context or insights. SEO will never be a one-size-fits-all exercise.

Analytics and data modeling are what initially drove me to become an SEO. I noticed that when I made changes to my sites (and tracked them), that sometimes traffic would increase. Slowly I tinkered around and figured out what brought more traffic. Relevance met with analytics instrumentation is the winningest combination. An SEO professional without analytics is a blind one; they became the key for SEOs measuring which tactics work and which do not.

There's essentially no argument that can be made to discount analytics as a core part of SEO programs. Perhaps it could be argued that mobile app installs or a mobile application's analytics wouldn't fall under SEO, but they still fall under app store optimization (ASO). App store optimization for mobile applications is a colossal industry. Much of the mobile optimization relied on paid in the beginning, but not anymore. ASO is the cool Canadian cousin of SEO and the two can work together in terms of

linking. Deep linking from within mobile apps can bring much needed oomph to mobile search efforts. When I say ‘juice’ I mean credibility in the eyes of the engines. Sentiment is an increasingly interesting factor for search (and social media). As machine learning evolves, along with hardware, detecting sentiment should gain importance over time.

Content and outbound communications are crucial for engaging humans and their counterparts, i.e. robots, crawlers and spiders, too. Compelling content that gets people excited fosters a site’s search dominance far more than thin corporate advertising coupled with stock imagery. Corporate communications like public relations, social media and email also fall under the SEO umbrella. Keyword-stuffing of phrases used in communications should involve research from the outset. Planning keyword targets and goals *together* is of the utmost importance for all outbound communications.



Penny-wise, search foolish

Keyword-ing like crazy for product pages, blogs and press releases is not *where it’s at* for search programs in 2016. Before almost everyone and their sister had blogs they issued press releases when they wanted to make an announcement. It was possible to pay to push press releases out via a service. Press releases do not carry anywhere close to the link juice they once did with humans OR with search engines.

There are many sites and services offering to help with placement of press releases for SEO and public relations gains.

Anything *you* can pay for *everyone* else in the world can pay for, too. How is that a key advantage? Be cautious of sites offering “exclusive placement” for pay. *Limited time* and exclusive promotional offers rarely are. It’s important to make the user feel like they’re crossing a **velvet rope**, gaining entrance to the hottest night club in town. Bouncers sit outside the club (not within it) to give an illusion of prestige. Just like a night club, calls to action should feel exclusive. Make your user feel special, not like any random stranger off of the street can just walk in.

There are many facets of outbound communications to consider. Optimizations in content can definitely *help* search programs, but not lead them. An unexpected example of outbound communicate for helping search is email. Yes, email. You are probably wondering how email relates to SEO. Email is a gray-haired business tool and remains the ultimate survivor of the marketing tool chest. The most aged of marketing methods is word of mouth, such as referrals from happy customers. Collect the emails of your advocates and do not abuse their trust. Attaining effortless yet enthusiastic referrals are the key to scalable growth; email is the uncool mini van taking you

there. Your net promoters are those who are customers engaged on your site so emailing them is a slam dunk.

Email

Umpteen tools purport to someday replace email (or make it more extreme) and they have come and gone. Email marketing remains useful because it drives traffic and revenue effectively at a very low cost. Email marketing also cross-pollinates SEO by boosting engagement and visibility of a site's content. A well-curated email list can drive revenue masterfully. If you allow public blog comments, for example, a targeted email to your net promoters can yield a significant amount of page views, shares and user generated content.

Email updates or newsletters with substantive information can also be placed on the site for content purposes. If site visitors devotedly pour over the information they see in an email, they'll probably revel in it on a website. Sites could potentially see rankings affected by email issues like excessive unsubscribe or junk mail flags. We could someday see email used as a ranking signal *officially*. Swell!

Social Media

Now that we've had our love session on the virtues of email, we must look to the new kid on the search block- social media and social bookmarking. There's a sharp dividing line between SEOs who believe social doesn't count and those who do for search relevance. The main argument for detractors to social SEO say that major search engines "do not officially recognize social" as a direct ranking factor. This is a highly misleading line of logic. The search engines also don't espy that the sky is blue. All the major engines *do not* announce everything they will consider when calculating results. The cloak and dagger element makes it a little more fun. **No** search engine will ever release the details of inner workings to core super ninja stuff. Why would any non-acknowledgement or mention of acceptance *for* social media matter?

Social sends traffic and often gets indexed, therefore it directly impacts search, recognized or not. It's a classic feedback loop. I'm a go-getter type who comes from a place of yes when trying new things, so I say yes- let's assume it matters! Social media also brings traffic to a website. What brings the traffic brings the thunder, then the rain. Social is an ever changing element that gives us relevant experiences. We should expect to see search within social itself start to matter more and more. After many years of studying numerous companies' analytics I have noticed when social traffic goes up organic search generally does too.

Healthy social traffic doesn't seem to *hurt* SEO efforts. Social media and social aggregators provide a lightning fast amount of natural back links and traffic. Social media services like Twitter and LinkedIn are currently being indexed by most major search engines. Aggregators like Reddit or Product Hunt will blow your traffic numbers out of the water.

There are umpteen factors colliding in the search results you see; from location to device used, sessions you're logged into, if you are walking while searching on a phone or standing still, etc. Location is one of the most financially valuable metrics used in mobile advertising. Therefore, location based marketers should be embracing **social** for mobile on paid and organic fronts.

Thought and care should be given to social when formulating a search program strategy. For example, right now tweets are getting indexed. Search Google, you see tweets there... Next year they could formally partner or do a revenue share if they're not secretly already. If I'm your SEO, then I'm going to consider anything that builds my relevance, territory and magnification of signals. If you add all the data together, it's hard to ignore social's impact on traffic.

Web Development

Some organizations choose to silo web development from marketing and this is a mistake. It is hard to imagine success in organic search without the ability to implement changes quickly on the home page. An SEO without access or authority to change what's on the company homepage is doubtlessly hampered. The person who has the responsibility of managing the homepage's search performance should have some level of influence. Failing that, the data should show influence. If the mobile version of the site differs from desktop for some reason, this should also be included under SEO.

Website development efficiency and efficacy is a key element of search performance with the advent of mobile's popularity

Ideally the search practitioner should lead or get involved in the user interface and experience of a website. The analytics instrumentation becomes especially important when it comes to assessing performance of a website. Instrumentation means the integrity and veracity of the analytics setup. If the analytics tools were deployed prior to an SEO's arrival then he or she must find reasonable evidence that lead tracking sources are properly capturing.



You may be wondering, does SEO cover *all* aspects of internet marketing?

While an SEO practitioner doesn't necessarily have to directly manage all of the previously mentioned practice areas, it's ideal for communication to be happening between these entities. An SEO who doesn't know about upcoming site updates won't know when to do their jobs. Strong communication happening between departments means the team will be catching things like whether or not the tracking scripts are still intact after a site update and to make the annotations in analytics for notable events. Annotation worthy examples: a product or campaign launch, a new speed fix, etc.

The most successful SEO programs I've built contained the right combination of **both** *the head and the heart*. Content is the heart of SEO. Content must contain sentiment for people to be able to empathize and connect with it. Analytics, website optimization and the more technical aspects are governed by the cogent side- the head.

Types of Practitioners

There are at least four distinct types of SEOs I have identified over the past decade. It is likely that most people will be a blend of different types, because everyone's experiences are unique. People often teach themselves SEO out in the field, because most start their careers as something else, first. In my case I started as a web developer and migrated into SEO through my love of analytics. Lastly, there are only a few places that offer formal SEO training like [O'Reilly](#), [Bruce Clay](#) or [Udemy.com](#). It's more common to "go rogue" as they say.

For a search program to be successful it must also be specific and clear. Each project should be treated like a special snowflake. If you are aware of where your institution's resources and strengths are, you'll know which type of practitioner to work with. *For example*, you have a technical product in the b2b space. You're working with a full front end web development team, but they are all mostly working on making the product and therefore loathe website change requests. The technical SEO is probably your best bet fit, because they'll work efficiently with a developer to quickly enact code changes. Some technical SEOs even know which tools to run on a CMS for sweet results.

Data / Analysts

Understanding large sets of data and knowing how to parse them is an art, but it calls for an analytical mindset. The analytics SEO is a former data scientist, quant, statistician, scientist, analyst or someone who is very advanced with their analysis and

knowledge of tools. These SEOs operate most from the head, not the creative realm (which they find annoying). They are the person who owns the task of correlating data, building dashboards and ensuring reports are trusted. Sometimes a PPC person can become a data-focused SEO as well, meaning they are a hybrid. The most important function to this type of SEO is that the past is learned from and the future is measured.

Technical

Technical SEOs are typically former web developers, web designers or software engineers who get into the field after gaining the desire to be involved in what's on the page, not just what's behind it. The technical SEO will always start with what I like to call the block and tackle elements; W3C compliance, data capture and all the key technical elements that could be causing issues with site growth. Also expect some on-page SEO too, UI and UX discussion falls within their realm. The limit to working with this type of SEO is that development resources are often the most expensive to a marketing department. The technical SEO will require more than administrative access to WordPress to thrive and enact meaningful changes.

Content & Communications

Content SEOs tend to be less technically driven, their focus is almost all on-page. They have a heavy target goal of gaining website traffic via social generation and gaining links at the core of their programs. This type of SEO is often your content *bar-tender*, constantly experimenting with the finest in artisanal small batch traffic sources. The content SEO tends to come from previous careers as writers, branding experts, corporate communications, public relations or social media managers. Content SEOs are hooked on finding new sources of traffic for their sites, they pursue link building programs and new platforms aggressively. They also tend to be fun at parties...

General / Novice

I have inherited a great deal of projects from these types of SEOs. They tend to be someone who tries their hand at some SEO plugins in WordPress and experiences success because they have a willingness to learn. These types of SEOs are less experienced so they tend to have the one-size-fits-all approach, initially picked up from things like cheesy all-in-one SEO tools. Then they learn. We all started out as a novice at one point, if you encounter one - be encouraging! If your budget only allows for one person to run marketing, the novice will generally work the hardest and cover the most ground. Recognize and accept the fact their learning curve is going to be there and build some learning into the job so they can fly.

Regardless of the type of SEO needed, many companies struggle with whether or not to hire an in-house SEO or go with an outsourced agency or consultant. My bias is significant as an agency operator, but agency SEOs have the power to stay up to date

on trends in a way the in-house ones do not. House SEOs sometimes have the ability to see large amounts of data sets if they are in publishing or e-commerce properties (or with PPC to also manage).

The difference giving agency SEOs an edge is that they have the ability to view independent amounts of data across different industries. If the agency has some commonalities between client industry or geography this can lead to unique insights. Viewing multiple sets of industry data with similar themes like 'business to business' *plus* 'technology industry' allows for insights into parallel universes, such as potential upcoming algorithm dips and bumps.

One compelling reason to hire in-house for SEO is if the institution is largely dependent on SEO as a primary means of income. In this case it's smart to keep the resources, history and knowledge in-house. Ideally if resources are sufficient having both in-house and agency search marketers collaborating together. Differing perspectives can benefit an SEO program, because more ideas mean more experiments to run.

SEO versus Growth Hacking

SEO is the group of practices for optimizing and increasing presence in search engines. Growth hacking is the practice of deploying a search program hyper-focused on growth, deploying any tactics needed to reach scalable growth. There is a heavy cross over between the two disciplines, but the goals are the same: to increase visibility and prominence for the website or app being promoted.

Let's start with definitions. The timeframes tend to vary for experimentation purposes, but SEO is to longevity as growth hacking is to brevity. Growth is typically measured in units such as traffic, new user signups and revenue, final sales transactions. SEO covers many legions of ground (practice areas), so it's common for practitioners to get pulled into other areas, potentially diluting his or her focus on search.

It is believed by many in the industry that Sean Ellis coined the term growth hacker in 2010.

A Growth Hacker is a person whose true north is growth. Everything they do is scrutinized by its potential impact on scalable growth. Is positioning important? Only if a case can be made that it is important for driving sustainable growth.

-Sean Ellis, Growth Hacking Godfather

In Silicon Valley everyone wants to find the sharp path to growth, otherwise commonly known as *the hockey stick*. The "stick" equates to the line of sharp growth increases, often physically shown in analytics. To possess the hockey stick is to hold the key to scalable growth and make it to the bigs. Sometimes, the zeitgeist.

Growth hacking's significance as a movement signals the entrance of developers and assorted techie hybrids moving into traditional marketing roles. In Silicon Valley many startups are experiencing the rise of developers and more technical folks as

leaders to marketing departments. It's very common for the CTO or COO to *also* be the CMO in the beginning; I think that's A-OK because sometimes very fun things can happen.

The two types of marketing seem like peas in a pod from the outset. SEO has a somewhat notorious reputation with a fair amount of the people in the developer community. Some developers respect it and some see SEO as folklore. Some cannot understand how anyone could manipulate search without having direct access to the search algorithms, they believe SEO is not real. There are conspiracy theorists for almost everything I guess. Growth hacking seems to feel like an acceptable practice to many developers I've spoken to. CMOs eyes light up when they hear *growth hacking*, it feels new and hip.

The biggest difference between the two approaches is the level of formality and experimentation. There's no actual "hacking" happening in growth hacking, unless the practitioners are donning their black hats off into the sunset. Many growth hackers started out as developers. Perhaps the *hacking* in this case means parting from traditional marketing realms and roles. There also tends to be an involvement in product development for Growth Hackers, retention is a key goal. Some of the most historic cases of explosive growth hacking success involved input into product development as well.

Hacking in the classic sense involves exploiting vulnerabilities in a system or network somewhere. A growth hacking "hack" in practice would then look disreputable. For example: A hack practice could be paying money for cheap traffic and then claiming it's organic or another less dubious traffic source. Cheaters tend to assume others will be taking short cuts as well, so they're betting their client doesn't know the difference between types of traffic or how to look it up themselves.

Growth hacking functionally means *exploiting* search engine weakness not *human* weakness, but philosophically it means identifying advancement and revenue opportunities quickly. SEO and growth hacking are essentially the same in my mind, but one feels a bit more eXtreme to the maxx.

Where do we spend the time to be successful SEOs?

There are four major areas where every SEO should dedicate their time: reading, data analysis, testing new tools and monitoring / automation. Without a commitment to master the four key areas, an SEO is doomed to fall behind eventually. Continuous learning is the most paramount activity for an SEO.

Every morning starts with reading news, blogs, sometimes the comments too, chatter on social, industry journals as well as outsider pieces. While it's sometimes hard to keep up with everything if you're also the practitioner, it's also important to stay read up about the topics that matter to your specific company or industry. Topics read

should definitely include search trends and top companies in and related to the search industry like LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter.

Research can also be automated in a multitude of ways. Beyond search triggered alerts, there are also social alerts and automated recipe alerts. Tools like **IFTTT** are a great way to aggregate content on a given topic on infinite mediums. I have some Twitter accounts that only exist to automatically feed me the information I want on a certain topic. The most critical thing to automate is competitor research. One should always keep an eye on those who want to take your spot.

Data analysis is another critical role for the SEO in charge of a program. Understanding at all times what is happening with your site from both a webmaster and statistician's viewpoint will only reap benefits. Data must be sliced and diced from different dimensions to show trends. Six months of data or more are typically needed to make significant organic revelations. Paid search is much faster for testing user flow or usability in many cases.

There's a difference between knowing your data and suffering from "analysis paralysis" i.e. the obsession with data to the point it is ineffective to attain positive business results. There's another strong case for automation with data analysis. Building dashboards in Google Analytics takes minutes and they can then be emailed weekly or daily depending on the demand.

Aside from dashboards it's good to go into any analytics tool with a rough idea of what you're wanting to learn or prove, first. Staring at overviews of data for the sake of it isn't a good use of time. My terminology (borrowed from Sherlock) is that I like to step inside my *mind palace*.

What that means in practice:

1. Make some assertions based on gut instinct and experience (i.e. LinkedIn is our top social lead converting source).
2. Keep an open mind as you sift through different data sources and views.
3. Study the data impartially to see what can be proven or disproved with confidence.

Testing out new tools is one of my favorite things to do. So many tools promise one-size-fits-all analytics insights, some purport to tell the future with predictive analytics. Be leery of tools that produce junky code that loads slowly. Watch out for those tools that attempt to capriciously control your future, like how some CDN's hijack one's link-juice via overzealous subdomain.

The best SEO colleagues I have worked with and studied under all have a handful of tools in their arsenal. It's usually a blend of search engine hosted tools, third party

testing tools and then some type of automation tools. We'll go into more detail on specific tools in that chapter

, however I cannot stress enough that there's no one-size-fits-all tool on the market right now (although many claim that).

From news aggregation to data segmentation, many essential functions of the SEO brain-trust call for automation. To truly stay on top of everything you will need the help of the bots. Do not fear them, bots are you allies (most of the time). The SEOs audience is generally half human and half bot, crawler, spider. So it makes sense to implore help from some of your cool bot friends.



Movement is not Momentum

One of the biggest issues I see many companies wrestle with on SEO is conflating movement with momentum. Movement means making a bunch of changes to a site based on hunches. Momentum means running programs with discipline and consistent growth month over month. There is no silver SEO bullet. The strongest SEO programs are organized machines running in concert with all of marketing and development departments working together.

The reason SEO caught my interest so many years ago is that fundamentally speaking, search is a garden that's always growing. The search field of practice introduces analytical thinking to creative with a splash of data. If you do not fight for your turf online then other people will take your spot. You can also lose your spot in the engines without trying.

Standing Apart

To stand apart and get page views you have to be copiously unafraid to try unfamiliar things. With each new search project an SEO should shed his or her previous biases, but more importantly- successes. I liken search marketers to ancient resting ram sharks who had to constantly move throughout the ocean to survive.

Every SEO program should be unique; each target audience has a place, too. There are demographics that convert better on Bing, like older males living in the mid-west. DuckDuckGo has also gained steam in recent years. The indie hip browser DDG started in 2008 to a slew of skepticism and proved everyone wrong with 500% YOY growth. They are based in Philadelphia and defied most predictions.

DDG's key differentiator in the market is security, they claim to not collect personal information like the other search engines do. In a post-Snowden world people are far

more concerned about privacy online than ever before. DDG will also allow the user to heavily customize their own user experience. We should expect to see more and more segmentation and new search engines being born as niche audiences form and methods of input expand.

A good SEO plan starts out with an audit; begin by verifying all the details and putting together the full picture of the landscape.

The Future is Near

Old SEO practices meant a huge emphasis on keywords. Because of the popularity of mobile and speech to text the focus for a program should be more on natural language. Don't get hyper-focused over particular short-form keyword searches unless you're convinced by overwhelming data it is generating revenue. The field of search engine optimization was once focused on one major goal; harvesting intent from search.

The emerging practices of search marketing involve more than capturing what people are already looking for, because there are many new places for sites to get found. Acquisition strategies within programs now often include *generating* intention as well as capturing it.

We know that SEO will continue to evolve through different devices and platforms. I believe that search will be powered by voice on mobile more and more in the next few years. The inputs and outputs are changing for search, the data layers are being mapped cannot be yet understood or correlated. We're not just in text-land anymore, Dorothy. Search never truly was a text-only game, input methods like images, voice and video content can be optimized for search. The number of people utilizing a smartphone with a voice search function has steadily increased since the introduction of Siri. Voice is consistently overtaking it's own numbers, month over month.

Smartphone users have Cortana, Google Now, and Siri to help them while they are on the go. Digital assistants have begun offering a safer way to look up information while driving or multi-tasking.

What you will get from reading this handbook:

- How to perform keyword research and spot search trends.
- Ways to think about the discipline of mindsets of SEO
- A working knowledge of how to run a campaign for traffic generation with analytics measurement.
- Mobile and platform agnostic strategies for search growth.
- How to demonstrate value from organic marketing efforts.
- Ability to ensure the fiscal integrity of a site.

- The sweetest way to run and report on an organic search program.

If you stay disciplined about pursuing your search education, you will rise to become an SEO super star. Let's do this!

Setting Up Programs and Reporting

Taking the time to setup an SEO program correctly is worth the effort every time. If you're walking into an established organization it's tempting to go along with what's already been setup.

Fuzzy data morphs into *untrusted* data, also known as dirty data. If you're walking into a project where everyone believes the frameworks setup for the site seem *trusty*, it's OK to use it- but stay vigilant. Once you start to manage something you will eventually become responsible for it. If there's an issue with something like data capture you'll soon inherit said issue. Do your own independent investigation when it comes to data capture and analytics instrumentation. A watchful eye catches mistakes, a complacent one doesn't. I cannot stress enough that it's fair to walk in the door with some skepticism if you're being asked to take over an existing search program. *Trust, but verify.*

Whether it's a new or continuing project you always start by determining the target, which is usually a company's webpage or sometimes a mobile app install, an Amazon or Etsy page. Clearly set benchmarks and physically examining the site source or landscape of the asset you're ranking for and skip this at your peril! Avoiding the code check will probably mean you'll miss out on key observations that will boost the program. There have been numerous cases where I've unveiled ancient tools of the past in the source. Nobody benefits from making calls to other servers for no tangible reason. Set yourself up for success by *not* keeping too much junk in the trunk.

Building a Growth Program to Last

A program that starts with welcoming an acceptable percentage of failure is more likely to flourish. **Without learning there is no growth. To learn you must test.** You must produce results.

The elements of a strong program include using measurement for optimization and building a site that fosters trust and transparency. Learning should be the key component within every program; a willingness to examine data impartially, constant research and experimentation.

Failure happens for many reasons, but it will continue to happen in any situation where there is a general unwillingness to ask questions or recognize mistakes.

When a great team loses through complacency, it will constantly search for new and more intricate explanations to explain away defeat.

- Pat Riley, former NBA Coach

Focus should instead be on building up the institutional mindset and constant tweaking of strategies and campaigns. An example of tweaking would be when you happen to notice that last month's blogs didn't pick up much traffic, then maybe the team should spend more energy to promote them. The same amount of energy or more should get spent promoting a piece of content as building it. Promoting blogs could mean turning parts of them into syndicated content or writing new descriptions to post again on social channels.

Installing an SEO plugin in WordPress is not SEO. The most successful SEOs are the ones who stay focused and let the data show them the real story of what's going on. They study trends and try to steer the boat correctly, taking bets on multiple territories. Doing what's easy or out of the box will never get you to the top search spot.

Logically speaking, if you walk into a new project with almost complete agnosticism then you are in the most likely state to be open to new ideas. If you're running a WordPress site without mobile optimizations and tons of unneeded CSS, then it is not typically a winning enterprise.



Phone a friend

Some industries are unbelievably difficult and specific, never be afraid to phone a friend with experience in any given area. Learning should always be encouraged for SEO success. One of the coolest parts I've enjoyed about being an SEO is the opportunity for cross-collaboration across many different industries. Also, it's OK to ask for SEO help, too. Most senior level SEOs who have done it for a long time actually enjoy talking shop, whether it's about the industry, war stories or latest trends.

The day should always include the element of research and discovery. Decisive action cannot be taken without sufficient information. SEOs have to read every day to find good consumable information, stay up on trends. The biggest sites that thrive from organic traffic typically produce a lot of content or aggregate other's content successfully.

The two most important factors for conversion are **trust and transparency**. Without both factors present the chances of a user engaging with a site are minimal. A good example of how to lose trust is to have mismatching page descriptions. The meta description is not a huge SEO factor any longer, but it's still the method by which your future site visitors will see what's supposed to be a summary of the page. If the summary doesn't describe what the page actually contains or if it feels too generic, you will not be likely to get the click.

Using Keyword Identification Tools

There's some wildly popular and long-running folklore about this type of research. When marketers struggle heavily on specific individual keywords they usually lose sight of the big picture. You have to increase *overall* organic visibility before you start to focus on individual terms. While it would be nice to automate keyword research, a human element is still required. Machines do not always know the subtle differences between terms. Predictive analytics tools aren't (yet) what they should be, although there are some very cool ones out there. No one tool currently performs all of the jobs of an SEO practitioner when it comes to keyword research. I have yet to find a one size fits all tool, but alas I prefer to use a few different tools as checks and balances.

The problem with using multiple tools is that the data will never match all the way 100%. Servers have syncing issues and varying time zones. Some tools seem to constantly change the way they display information so it can be hard to correlate. There's a trend towards oversimplified reporting for popular platforms like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Any tool that doesn't allow for the user to download and/or export all crude information into a CSV is holding something back (your data). Otherwise you'll have to correlate by hand, which leads to too much time spent on reporting. Automation to some degree is necessary, which we will cover in the next section.

Go through the weeds towards goals

There are at least a dozen marketing and development practice areas combined that legitimately fall under SEO's big hug. When you're touching the website it's easy to get bogged down on things that are seemingly important for the company, but not essential SEO. I've seen programs fail when they lose focus, because they turn into grouped general marketing practices. There's no silver bullet in SEO, it's more like you're *weaving a digital quilt*. When you combine a variety of little things the needle feels like it's moving forward when it's really not. Silly little crawler bots can be deceiving when you're looking at traffic. Even the best of us have seen false positives for indicators of growth. The trick is to find them. Course correct quickly.

SEO goals are a thorny thing, unfortunately. Everyone should have tangible goals for a search program, but *specific* numbers are **not** possible to promise explicitly. I've seen marketers and search folk who sometimes overcompensate when outlining their

goals (in sales mode), but that should **not** include promising a hard number for growth or top place in search. Since SEOs do not have direct control over the search engines it doesn't make logical sense to claim direct control over results.

This is where it's good to reframe the concept of what the SEO can do. A key question to always consider: what is our target goal for *overall traffic* and then also for *organic traffic*? Set a realistic goal based on the amount of assets you have, i.e. content there is to promote or how many activities are happening. If your incoming website traffic is hovering around 100 visits per day *from all sources*, is a sudden quadruple jump in organic a realistic goal? While everyone wants to achieve scalable marketing growth, it may not happen in the first few months.

When people ask me to pick a goal, I typically say we will increase conversions (sales) and the overall amount of organic search. Never promise exact percentages of growth, credible SEOs do not tend to do this. After reviewing site analytics and looking at the site I can make an make my OWN assessment on the potential for increases. There are too many unknown factors to make assumptions about what's known. I generally don't vocalize my predictions too loudly for fear of misrepresenting results, however, I can study any available analytics history and look for the factors that indicate whether growth has ever happened in the past. **Nobody** can promise definitive organic growth, they can only aspire to it. **Nobody** can explicitly guarantee traffic is coming for certain unless they're buying it.

All growth depends upon activity. There is no development physically or intellectually without effort, and effort means work.

-Calvin Coolidge, US President

The key to growth is watching the dials and a clear way to do that is through reporting. Goals should be clearly defined enough to feel locked in to all relevant parties, you cannot fight on a floating battleground (unless you're the Navy). An issue many SEO programs face is with reporting. My first major SEO project failed not in the SERPs, but in management because I didn't pick one firm set of metrics to report on regularly for the executive team. Therefore, they had no confidence that what I was doing was working.

Over the years I have developed my own dashboards and custom reports to demonstrate growth on a consistent basis. I tweak them and build new ones constantly while keeping physical backups in PDF form. Numerous organizations I've worked with find reporting to be one of the most difficult pieces of the program. Reporting is especially expensive to an SEO program when it isn't automated, because nobody typically wants to pay for reporting time. Majority of the SEOs energy should be spent generating traffic, not bending over backward to show what they are doing.



Haters *Gonna* Isolate

There are a subset of people, *sometimes* developers, who do not ‘believe’ in the practice of SEO and therefore they’ll want to dissect all SEO-related practices. Skeptics are present in every organization and that’s OK. The antidote to this is reporting. My suggestion is to find a balance on what’s being reported so all parties feel transparency exists.

Annotate SEO impactful changes in analytics diligently, things like updates being made to the website or the launch of a new campaign. A majority of analytics suites have a mechanism to create annotations. Reporting is the most difficult when the data is incomplete; running in circles to compile information from multiple sources is an awful position to be in.

If you’re pulling analytics information for a report you’re presenting to others *always* pull down a local copy or take a screenshot of what you are viewing. It’s an easy mistake to pull something and forget the timeframe or maybe you’re in the wrong view. Keeping a record of where it’s coming helps you maintain data integrity in reporting along the way.

Setting up an Organic Search Program

Whether you’re SEO’ing a new site or old, the following section will cover how to setup an organic search marketing program. Your goals for search have now been defined. It is the time to cross over into targeting *how* people are going to be hitting your site. It used to be good enough to harvest the potential searcher’s interest, but now there’s an industry-wide expectation for a search practitioner to also generate interest. The vehicle for understanding interest of a potential visitor is the keyword.

Always consider the end point, whether the user will be buying an antique eagle figurine or downloading a white paper. You can start with research by dissection.

Keywords are not necessarily the heart and soul of search anymore, (h/t algorithms), but they’re still the best path to attaining search goals. Non-technical marketers may not grok the nuances of rich snippets or server optimizations, but they’ll certainly get keyword targets. When starting SEO programs it’s imperative to choose keyword targets and be clear about the audience you are trying to reach. Take the time to understand if your keyword targets are reflective of how people are *actually* searching. Look at everything from a few potential perspectives, the buyer, the researcher, the looky-loo. There should be a few personas (types) of people who could potentially visit the site you’re optimizing. Put yourself in their shoes mentally. If the site you’re working on existed previously, you can start with the content that is there. Look at whatever analytics might exist to assess what’s performing well, if anything.

If the site is a new one, then start doing random searches for what *you'd* use to try and find the site *yourself*. If the product or service is new and therefore undiscovered pick what's most closely related. In a new program you should be the most open to possibilities that don't feel as natural to you. In the beginning phases you want to trap organic search queries, period. The true shaping of keyword goals will always come later, it's not a good idea to get caught up on 'the perfect query' as that's not really *a thing*. It's always going to evolve and change how people find a site (or if they do at all). In more than 20 years of working on the web I've never heard anyone declare, "my website is done." Done-ness on the web is also not *a thing*, especially in the search world. Ranking focused programs often miss out on new opportunities.

The Google select window (below) or snippet preview window in the browser is the fastest way to see how queries are shaping up in terms of the searcher's interest. Understanding a site visitor's intention is the most powerful information to have in keyword research.

Let's take the example of our friend the eagle, in this exercise we're looking to potentially start a new web site with the goal of bringing awareness to the endangered eagles, the most majestic bird in the United States. I start typing eagle and the *snippet preview* starts to form:



Figure 2-1. Simply start typing to see what's suggested by most major search engines.

OK, now we know that the eagle cam is popular in the United States. I assume this is based on the United States, which is where I reside. Visit different country sites if you're looking for international perspectives, like Google.ca or Google.co.uk, etc. After some research about the eagle cam, many sites are government run by parks. Whether something is .gov or .edu matters more to Yahoo! and Bing than Google. We can keep that in mind for our target audience. Additionally, we see a movie called *Eagle Eye* came out in 2008 that we will likely not need to pay attention to.



Variety is the spice of life!

Bing Webmaster Tools can also be used for organic keyword search. Remember that the demographics for some search engines differ from others. Perform research not just on Google, but where your potential site visitors are most likely to be.

Now we will try DuckDuckGo for a fun comparison.



Figure 2-2. Perform searches in multiple search engines to compare suggestions.

We now know that the eagle cam is indeed popular, because it has risen in search interest to the very top (since the last time we checked). Theoretically you'll do this type of research a few different engines or sites over a period of time. We also now know in the eyes of two search engines that eagles are considered an animal, a band, a thriller starring Shia LaBeouf and a company that makes travel gear.

Since we're starting an eagle conservation site, we'll need to think about how *any* of these buckets (areas) can help us. We need to think about what information does not make sense. For example, sorry not sorry to the late 90s Swedish rocker, *Eagle-Eye Cherry*, you're not joining this keyword party. *Maybe if I'd typed in the hyphen...*

The most likely keyword candidate to consider studying the data surrounding it is the **eagle cam**. We can now safely study the eagle cam site based in Washington, D.C., because this project also aims to increase awareness of conservation for the majestic national bird of the United States. In truth, there are at least **16 countries** across the globe that name a various species of the eagle as their national bird.

Once the rough buckets and keyword goals are defined, no matter how loosely, the next phase of *search* research starts. Tools like **Moz's Keyword Explorer**, **Wordtracker**, **SEMRush**, **SpyFu**, **Google Trends** or **Keyword Planner** are typically the next step when performing keyword research.

Take your query or list of queries and let the games begin! If the bucket of search is enormous then find a data fork in the road to take, try a trends tool *first*. Keyword research should be a creative and analytical enterprise. Make your best guesses when thinking of different phrasing, chances are you'll be somewhat right and wrong at the same time. I've found that the keyword combination is typically what the site owner thinks people search balanced with actual trends in search. It's also OK and quite efficient to throw paid search into the mix for experiments. All learning about the user, search queries, etc. will help benefit. Think of keywords like races, which term or phrase is going to get you in front of the right person?

I like to make queries compete in the markets I'm targeting to see who comes out the victor. First I select my category:

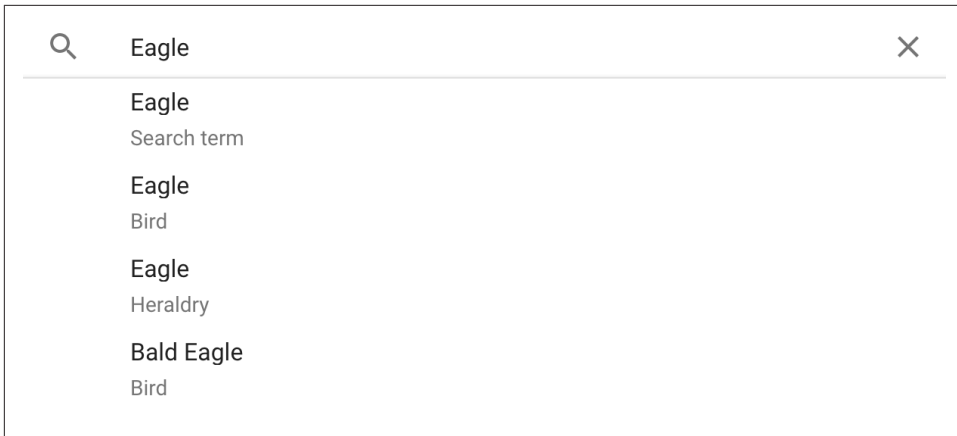


Figure 2-3. The breakdown listed in the Google trends search window is useful information to file away for later.

After selecting the bird category, things get interesting. When devising a site's keyword topology, categorization is especially meaningful to an SEO. Once you have a rough impression in your mind of the search landscape for keywords, it's a good idea to start looking at other tools like [Google Trends](#) research.

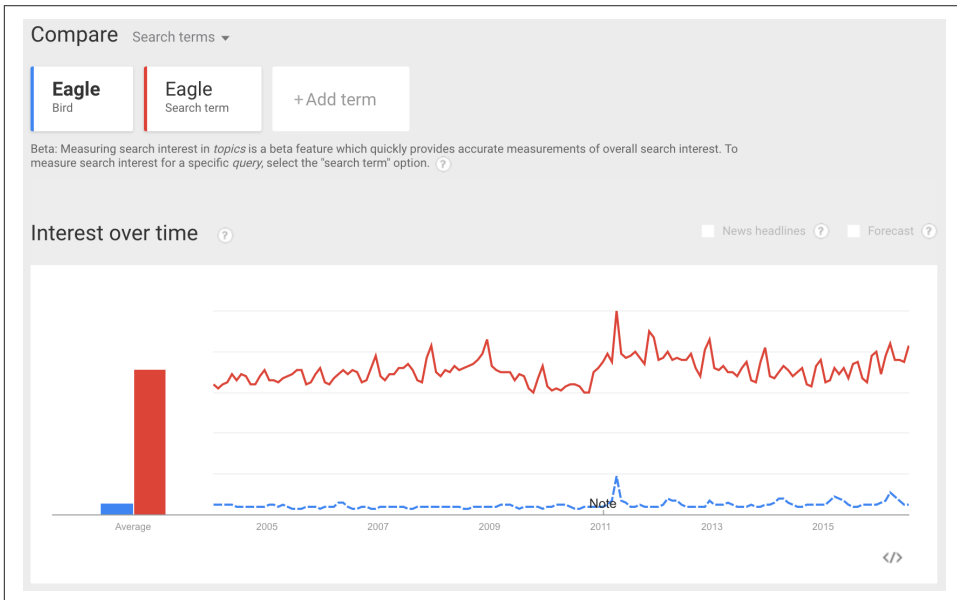


Figure 2-4. We get a better idea of how small search interest is overall for the bird versus the search term.

We also see above that this new categorization is a beta feature. New features are rolled out all of the time, it's important to take note. By way of the related searches pane at the bottom we start to get more ideas. We're also tipped off about something we hadn't considered previously after selecting the "rising" tab on the right hand side of the bottom right.

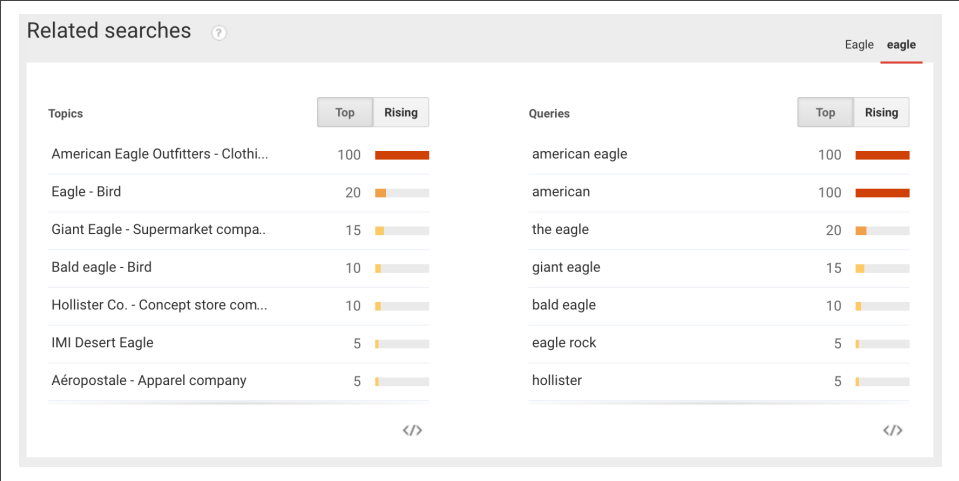


Figure 2-5. Hey, wait! There's a store named American Eagle that we should watch out for, it's possibly on the rise. We do not want to rank for "American Eagle" or compete there.

Let's take a look at the organic interest for Bald Eagles and examine whether or not it's on the rise categorically.



Figure 2-6. Huzzah, we see a suggestion that the Eagle cam is on the rise!

Now we understand what surrounds *the eagle* as a search term. We're starting to run out of useful ideas since we are seeing so much unrelated search terms. Time to start looking elsewhere. It's not a bad idea to also use Google's **PPC Keyword Planner** tool to generate lists of new keyword ideas. You'll get to see what competition looks like as well.

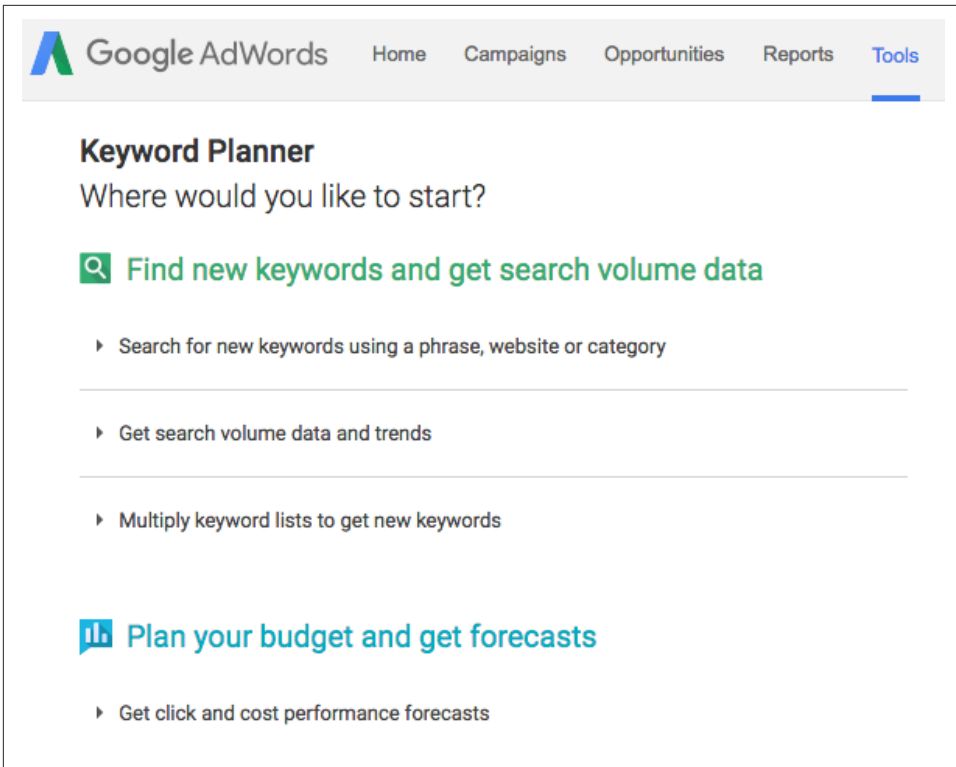


Figure 2-7. Generally you'll want to start with at least a few variations to get suggestions from.

Once you have your list, it's easy to examine the keyword interest. In this case I've chosen "Bald Eagle" to try and eliminate some of the noise. I do not want to rank for "American Eagle" or "Eagle cam." The query has some interest, but it also looks like interest has dropped recently. This type of spike indicates a news spike of some type where interest was high and then trailed off.

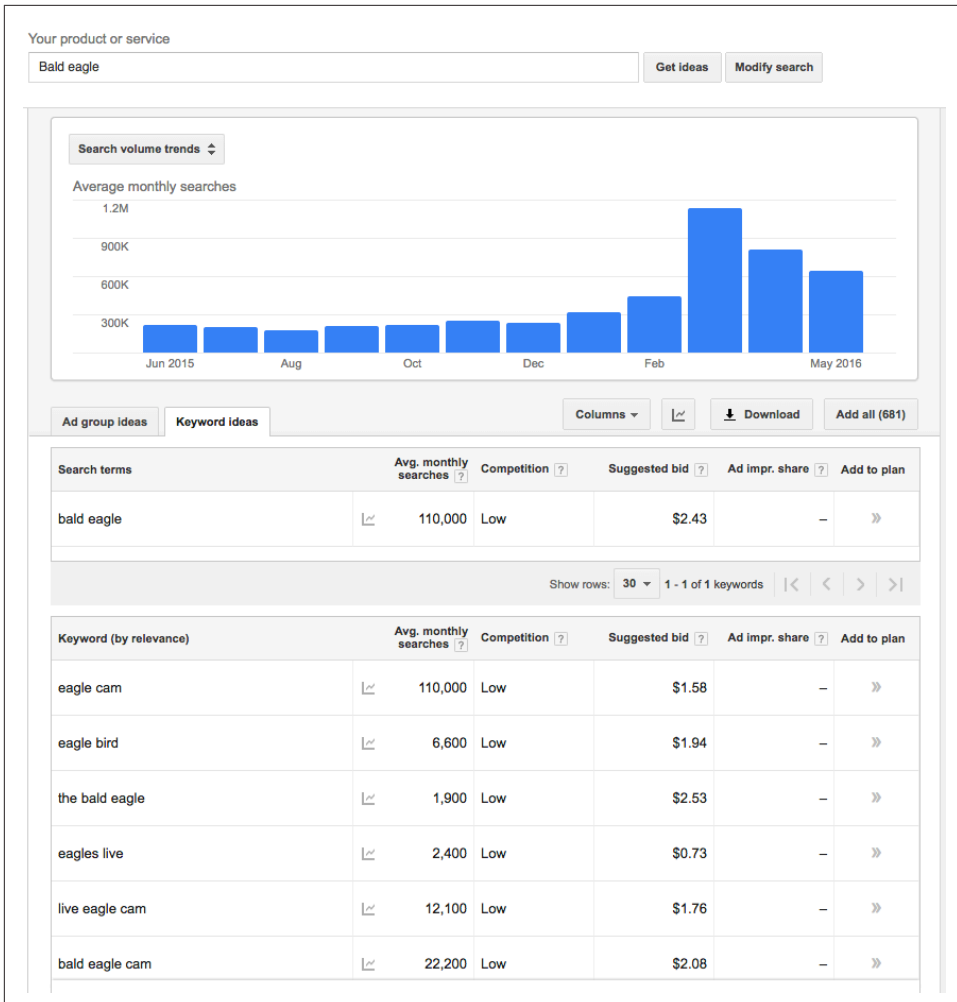


Figure 2-8. Based on timing and news, people searching for the bald eagle may have been doing so just to watch the famous *Eagle Cam*.

At this point I like to export the lists from both tools and then cross-compare. If there's a set of keywords that will then appear on both lists, you've likely got a winner. Winning terms for the example above would be for marketing the bald eagle

cam. If you were looking to rank for Eagle shaped teacups and mugs, then you'd need to try another approach.

Keyword Deep Thoughts

Another trend to consider hopping aboard on is following the autocomplete suggestions train. Interestingly enough, Google Suggest aka Autocomplete cannot be turned off as a feature. You can only choose to not select Autocomplete sites in Google searches. What goes into these queries? [Google's guidelines](#) say:

Search predictions are generated by an algorithm without human involvement. The algorithm is:

- Based on objective factors, including how often others have searched for a word.
- Designed to reflect the range of info on the web. Because of this range, the search terms you see might sometimes seem strange or surprising.

Optimizing for suggested answers means using longer queries and thinking semantically. Overall, try to focus on intention. It's kind of like that book *The Secret*, but different. If you focus on the intention the user brings to the query, you're more likely to anticipate what the person wants to know.

Search isn't always going to be in the web browser, it's everywhere there's connectivity and devices. Cast the net wide in the beginning and whittle down the keyword targets as you go based on performance.

Showtime! Check all systems

So you've got some rough keyword targets (buckets) locked down. Nice job. Now we will do one more check by digging into the site's source. You have to know what you're dealing with before you can determine where to go. Keywords were once the ultimate goal of the SEO, but as our technology landscapes have grown so have our battlefields. It's most important to focus on increasing overall traffic from organic search, not specific target keywords per se.

Note: if e-commerce conversions are already present in analytics or there's use of a shopping cart it's always best to correlate them to a secondary data source regularly.

How do we put the program into practice, you may be wondering. There's one final and very critical piece to setup, the physical site audit. Now that we have our keyword targets and search goals we can begin examining the physical website audit:

- Review the source of the site to see how it's put together. What CMS do they use?

- Data capture integrity check. Understand where the various tracking scripts lie and if any customization has happened.
- Check for abandoned tools or scripts no longer in use or commented out code.
- Check the physical size of the images on the site.
- Test all offers, i.e. webforms on every page- on any page where the form or content differs.
- Use a utility to check for broken links.
- Physically click around on the links within the site to get a sense for how the funnel works.
- Review site speed performance. Ascertain how many servers are being called.
- It's also important to check the page for **W3C validation** and do **timing tests**.

I like to take screenshots of the website, of social media accounts and annotate when we're starting a program before any work is performed. It's also a good idea to setup Google alerts on the major keyword topics. Alerts should also be setup on the competition so you're passively being made aware of any big announcements or press coverage.

If proper analytics tools are *not* deployed for some reason, correct that horrific error and then take it day by day. In analytics begin to study which traffic sources are bringing *the most* traffic and balance your future efforts with which sources *perform the best*. Performance can be judged by time spent on a site, number of pages reviewed or conversions themselves. It's a marketer's dream to be able to calculate conversion costs. This dream can become reality! Setup analytics, create benchmarks, deploy any other tools.

Regardless of what types of analytics and tools you use, there are many free ones available. Google Analytics is free and the tracking script is easy to deploy, but do not forget Google Webmaster tools. It's crucial to combine GA with GMT for website SEO. Creating benchmarks within analytics can be simple as an annotation in GA denoting when the program is beginning. Documentation is the key to understanding where you've started. Memories get fuzzy and site management changes hands so annotations are the key to making meaningful observations.

Once you've checked what's behind the scenes you can perform the SEO audit on-page. The on-page audit involves a deep eyeballing of the page. Take a good look at the page and compare it against any data you may have on effectiveness of links. For example, when looking at the homepage in analytics, you can see in most analytics tools where people are clicking from the home page. If something seems askew on the page, like a web form that's hard to read or too far below the fold, then chances are it's not working well.

In the early days we saw users creating a boomerang pattern with their eye patterns in the heat maps. Jakob Nielsen's research shows that it's more **like an F** pattern in the current age.



Figure 2-9. <https://blog.kissmetrics.com/using-neuroscience-for-blogs/>

Content is the current vehicle for keyword expansion in search. That could change at any time. It's a historical misconception that one can simply 'power it out' by *stuffing keywords* into every nook and cranny. Think back to the days of the research paper and seek to build credibility page by page for the corresponding keyword.

Keywords are no longer the endgame of SEO, they are more of a guiding light. I have seen many folks in the industry decry keywords as becoming less important than before. Keywords were once one of the most definitive ways for us to measure SEO progress, this has changed as our measurement tools have improved.

Jayson Demers, who writes about SEO for [Forbes](#) has said that keywords still do matter.

"To put it simply, keywords do still matter in 2016. Chances are they'll always matter, to an extent. However, as search engines have become more sophisticated, they have started putting far less emphasis on specific keywords, and more emphasis on the meaning or intent behind those keywords."

Context matters more than it ever has to search. Context is best determined by intent. It used to be good enough to harvest the intent of a search, that's not longer true. Now it's important to *generate* intention as well as harvest it. Perhaps the better way to think about it is not just as keywords, but as intent *signaled*.

Getting Traffic

Use keywords thoughtfully, but don't be spammy about it. The growth in traffic will not just come from placing keyboards everywhere. It's OK to leverage other platforms in your programs in the beginning for traffic. Eventually it's necessary to build your own organic program, no matter what though- you have to diversify. For example, if you leverage a weekly trending topic on Twitter for boosts of traffic then you have to be aware that if the company goes under or gets sold- you're toast.

Competitors

Everything we put out on the web is fairly transparent, websites, social media and content distribution is all public information. Study your competitors early and often, setup auto alerts for web mentions of their names. The benefits are countless in learning from other people's strategies and online marketing spend.

You can safely sign up for a competitor's offers on their site to test them. I sometimes test competitors by clicking on their paid search ads as well- do not do this excessively (uncool).

My first step in looking at competitors is to plainly view what they put out there and categorize it. Simply review the competition's source and social media. Reading a website's meta title and description will allow you to uncover the targets of their marketing program. If they also happen to list their meta keywords in the source, that's even better. You can also view what tracking tools they're using. In hyper competitive markets knowing the subtle differences in tools, styles and even hosts can make a difference.

It's advantageous to gain knowledge from the investments of others in their SEO. There are tools to study what other site's are using for PPC. Otherwise it's easy to review competitor website source and glean all sorts of information. Start a spreadsheet and begin gathering the crucial information. Any meta keywords listed will tell you what targets the competition thinks are important. Social media listings and descriptions should be pulled into the same spreadsheet for analysis.

Reporting

The reporting of a search marketing program can sometimes *make or break* the program. It is also an area where I have seen many people spend excessive amounts of time. If you are struggling with reporting that generally means the goals are unclear - or even worse, performance levels are not good.

People become most skeptical about SEO when they don't understand what they're getting; reporting is where everything gets cleared up.

Where I've seen programs fail is by staying *too insular* with what's going on. If you're doing the work and things are improving, then showing data should be an easy thing to do. If you're skating by or have mediocre numbers, then reporting is always going to induce agony.

As already mentioned it's most important to pick a few key metrics and report on them consistently. Do not change metrics suddenly or cherry pick data sets, which sometimes borders on dishonesty.

Here are a few sample metrics to report month-over-month (MOM) for a site:

1. CTR for all traffic sources, aka value of traffic
2. Unique page visits / Pageviews via all traffic sources
3. Unbranded keyword visits to the site
4. Quality and amount of backlinks to the site
5. Page engagement: bounce rate, session duration
6. Social shares and corresponding site traffic from social (by channel)

Metrics reported on should be directly corresponding to the marketing activities happening. If you are only reporting and not doing any of the work, the above metrics are a good way to start. My preferred way to pull together information is with a dashboard. Most tools have some type of pre-built or suggested reports. The tool I often pull together reports in is Google Analytics, but there are other tools as well.

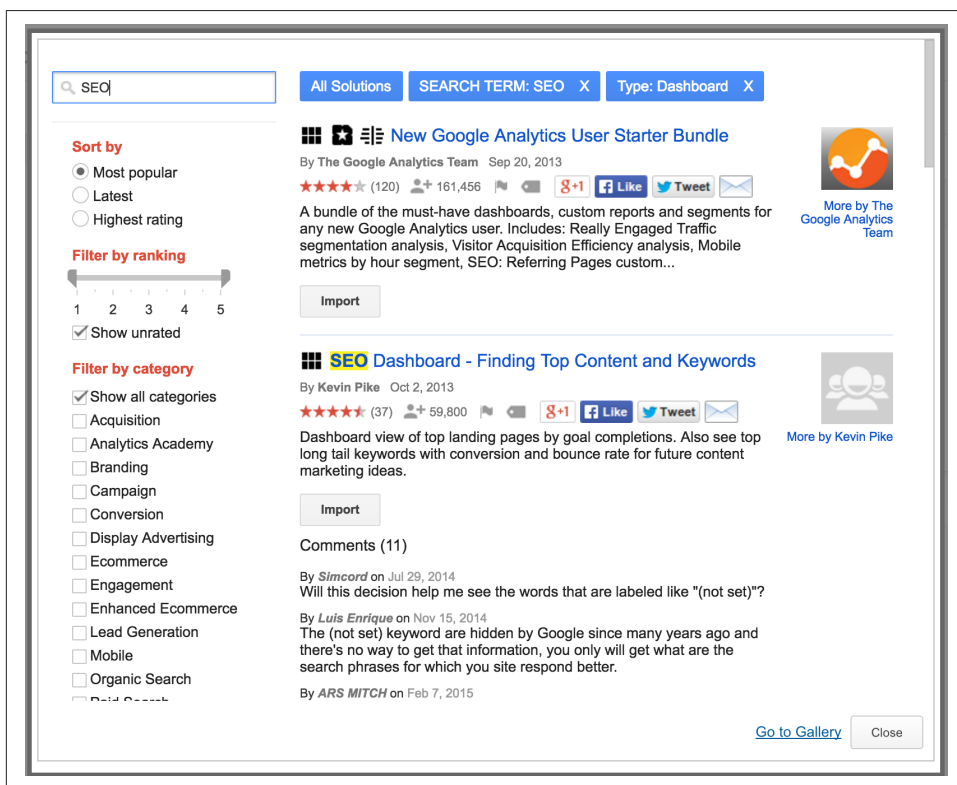


Figure 2-10. Over 700 results for the “SEO” query within the Google Analytics Solutions Gallery. So many places to start!

To create a dashboard simply select one from the Analytics Solutions gallery. Read reviews and choose the one that fits the best for what you need. Click on reporting then on Dashboards > +New Dashboard:

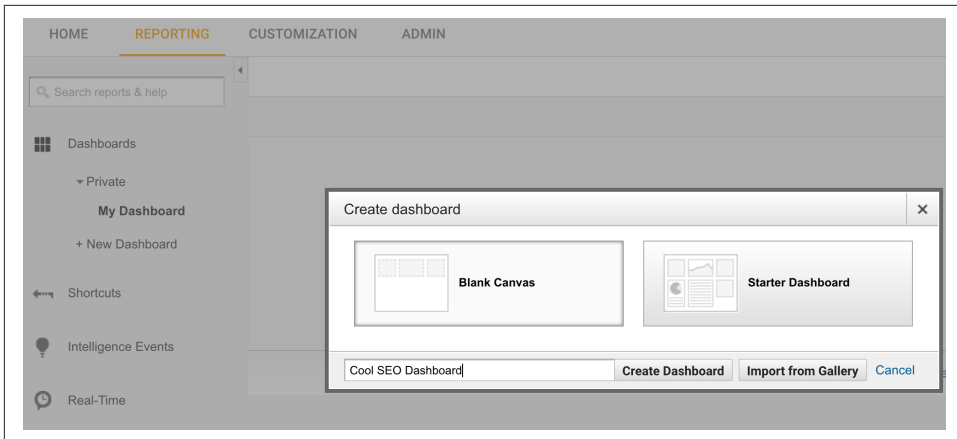


Figure 2-11. Creating a “Cool” SEO dashboard means at-a-glance snapshot of important data

Deciding what matters to your program should be governed by how you spend your time. Are you running social for the site? Then definitely include a widget about social. My recommendation for what to choose in a dashboard always starts from what the key stakeholders want to see. Some people, for example, really care about raw traffic numbers, it’s an indicator of success to them. Others prefer straight up conversions or final sales. It’s always good to build one widget *per activity* performed, so if we’re running social, email and PPC as services I’ll show at-a-glance information for each area respectively. In the case of this dashboard snippet, we were running both content and social programs for SEO.

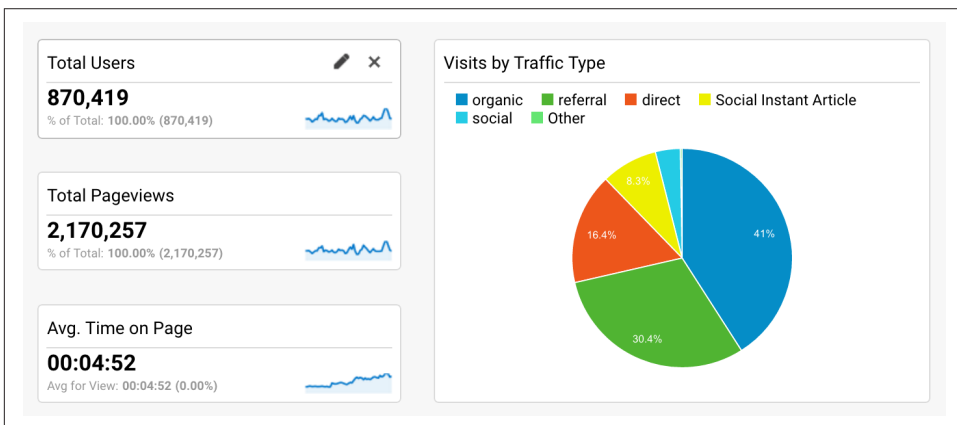


Figure 2-12. An example snippet from a content dashboard in Google Analytics

If we want to drill down more specifically on social media, we should be studying the data within platforms themselves as well as how those users interact with the site.

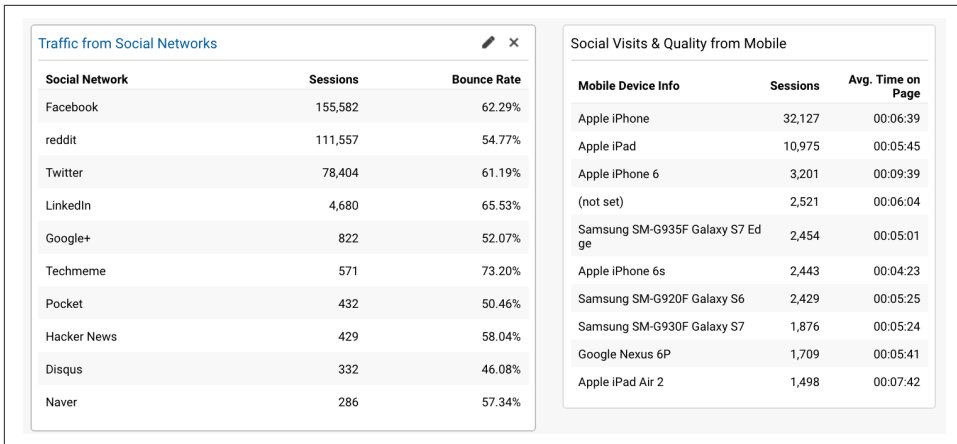
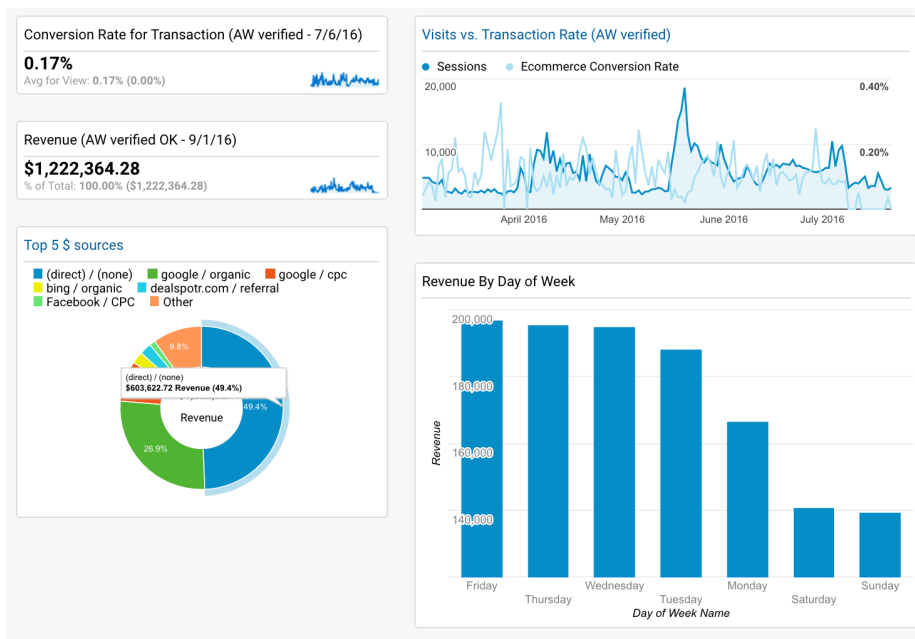


Figure 2-13. Traffic and mobile quality from social media

We know that social media activity happens quite frequently on mobile, it's the easiest way to share and digest information. Nearly **80%** of overall time spent on social is on mobile.

What is the price of a super sweet tweet? It depends. Ecommerce sites have the clearer path to conversion over those who do not. An organization must carve out what they deem a lead's worth to be, it typically depends on deal size and how long it takes to close.



Note that this e-commerce dashboard has verified information with initials and dates for easy reference.

The above dashboard helps us to see that our conversion rate is OK. We also know our best sales days are typically Wednesday to Friday and Google organic is our biggest verified method of search input. Clearly we have some data capture issues to resolve in the GA account above, because we never want to see such a high percentage of direct / none as a traffic referral.



Not All Widgets Work

Sometimes depending on how your goals are mapped out in Google Analytics you won't get an exact match for conversions you are expecting to see. I have seen dashboards report data differently than the Goals section sometimes. I do not know why this happens, but sometimes when you use filters or other more intricate tools you'll have to take an extra step.

Many lovable widgets are available in the Analytics Solutions gallery. It will take some energy to customize the dashboard if you decide to go pre-built. Also, note that

nobody else can see your dashboard in Google Analytics unless you specifically share it with others.

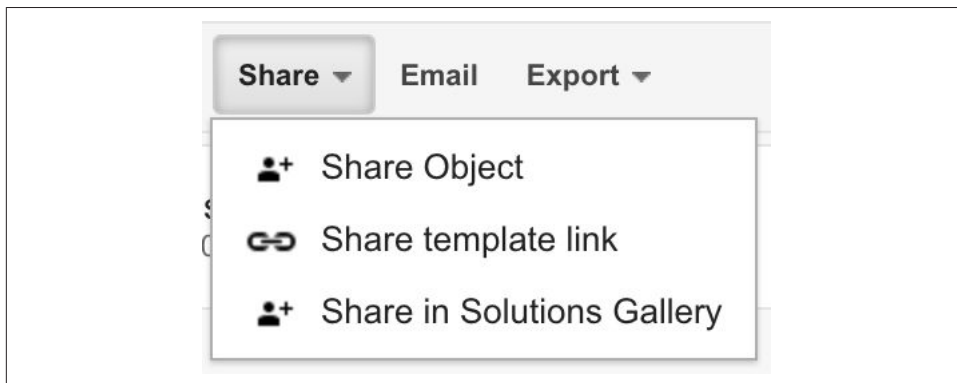


Figure 2-14. Select share object for others with GA access to see what you've built. Share in the gallery if your dashboard is so freaking cool you cannot keep it for yourself.

It's also extremely useful to review dashboards with a date comparison range. Measurement over time for the same metrics is a sure road to realization when coupled with annotations. If everyone involved in the SEO program agrees that your dashboard reflects what's important then you can also run month-over-month (MOM) analysis for those metrics in an automated fashion.

I like to compare a month or more of data to a previous period. Typically it's fine to compare one month versus the previous month except for the summer months. In seasonal industries it's very typical to see a drop-off in traffic for the summer or the heart of winter. When comparing data sets for a seasonal company it's most useful to look at the same period the previous year to better gauge performance.

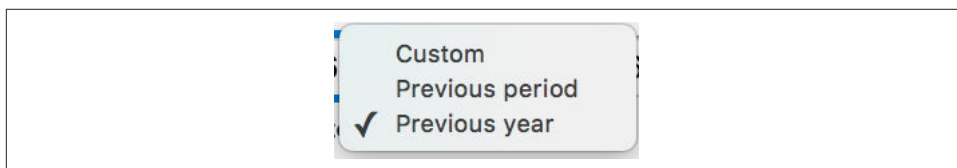


Figure 2-15. In the date selection panel of GA in the top right when viewing any data, comparisons are options available.

Branding Matters

When reporting on value it's important to separate branded search terms from non-branded. Unless there are specific concerns and needs, effort should not go into ranking for brand. Non-branded keyword terms are the ones SEOs can definitely view as product of their efforts.

Many companies stuff their name into the beginning of the title attribute of a page, but ranking for the name is the easiest thing to do. Instead focus on what's relevant to the page itself.

Now you've picked some program goals, built consensus, checked under the hood and started keyword bucket identification and figured out how to pull together a GA dashboard. You trust your data and have checked for all the basics to ensure site health.

The next phase for the search program is to start embarking upon your outbound campaigns like social media content sharing, creating content and beyond. Huzzah!

