The Art of
SEO

/Theory/In/Practice

4th Edition

Mastering Search Engine Optimization

Free
Chapter

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The Art of SEO

FOURTH EDITION

Mastering Search Engine Optimization

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Keyword Research

Keyword research is the process of finding the words and phrases that connect your customers or clients to your business. This is the most important aspect of search engine marketing, but it also has a great deal of business value beyond the web. Keyword research enables you to predict shifts in demand; respond to changing market conditions; and provide new products, services, and content that web searchers are actively seeking. In the history of marketing, there has never been a more efficient and effective method of understanding the motivations of consumers in virtually every niche.

The Words and Phrases That Define Your Business

In this chapter, we'll walk you through the entire keyword research process, beginning with building your domain expertise and analyzing the language associated with your company and its products. Next, we'll give you some tips for developing a list of topics, and how to use it to develop an initial keyword list. We'll show you how to set up a spreadsheet to track and calculate your keyword plan, and how to use data from an SEO platform to calculate the best opportunities. Lastly, we'll provide some guidance on how and when to update your keyword plan.

By the end of this chapter, you will have a spreadsheet with search terms and phrases that are of value to your business, categorized by topic and ordered by their level of opportunity. This is the basis for every subsequent chapter in this book. Without going through the keyword research process, you cannot develop meaningful strategies and plans for updating your website to be more search friendly, or effectively create new content to attract search traffic, or successfully tune your analytics to look for future opportunities. Once you have your keyword plan, on the other hand, you'll be able to develop your website's editorial calendar, optimize your site's title tags, identify internal linking opportunities, develop your link-building campaigns, and much more.

Don't rush through this. Keyword research is not a fast process, especially if you have a large retail site with a lot of different products. Plan to spend at least a few days on the initial effort.

NOTE

To do a proper valuation of your keyword list, you must have a reliable and current data source for (at the very least) monthly search traffic and cost per click (CPC), though ideally you'll have keyword difficulty and current rank data from an SEO platform or data provider as well. If you haven't made a decision about that yet, then you can either use some of the free or low-cost tools we introduced in Chapter 4, or delay your keyword research effort until you're ready to sign up for an SEO platform. However, don't wait too long on this, as keyword research is a foundational component of all your SEO plans.

The Different Phases of Keyword Research

The keyword research process can vary quite a bit depending on where you are in your SEO project and the individual needs of the business. Therefore, we're going to present the whole process that you'd follow if you were working on a completely new site that isn't currently ranking for anything. Even if this is not your situation, you should read this chapter in sequence anyway, just in case there's a knowledge gap.

The first keyword research effort is typically concurrent with an initial site audit that establishes a starting point for the big-picture SEO project, but every project and organization is different. Ultimately it depends on the information you are required to deliver as part of your first estimate. This can include a basic assessment of the keywords that a site currently ranks for, but it should go beyond that to include a list of keywords that would likely benefit the company. If you are expected to produce a list of title or meta tag recommendations as part of your audit, then you'll have to put a lot of effort into your keyword plan.

After you complete your initial optimization work, you will be able to more accurately assess the cost of optimization for your keyword list. This is a good time to drill down into long-tail keywords to look for the most efficient opportunities. Depending on the size and complexity of the SEO project, this phase of keyword research can be the most labor-intensive.

Once you've built and refined your keyword plan, you'll schedule regular reviews to update it with new data. This can be done once a month or once a quarter; you should never go more than a year without a full keyword review.

In most cases, seasonal keyword research should be tracked and scheduled separately from your regular keyword reviews. Nearly every site can benefit from seasonal keyword research, even if there isn't an obvious seasonality to the company.

Expanding Your Domain Expertise

Before you go further, ask yourself how well you know the company and its industry. You cannot successfully conduct keyword research for a business that you aren't familiar with. You don't have to be the world's foremost expert on it, but you should have a reasonable understanding of the fundamental technologies behind the products and services it provides, its history, its mission, the size of the market, who the main competitors are, the impact of various seasons and holidays, and basic customer demographics. If there are existing customer avatars or personas, ask to see them.

If you're an outside consultant, this is a critically important part of the process. If you're an employee of this company, then take the time to learn something new about it. Talk to the most recent hires and the longest-tenured employees about their experiences, read the documentation, or do a Google News search and see what's been written about it.

Building Your Topics List

It's a good idea to build a topics list before you go further with keyword research. Start by identifying the entities and concepts relevant to the company, its products or services, and the industry as a whole.

If possible, begin at the lowest level, then go up one step at a time. What are the topics that apply to every search query that you want to rank highly for? For instance, if the company sells smartphone cases and screen protectors, then the lowest level might be *smartphone accessories*, or, if that's too broad (say, if you don't sell earbuds, chargers, or cables), perhaps you need to think of this as two topic areas (*smartphone cases* and *screen protectors*). How you create your topics list needs to be thought out to best fit the logical structure of your market. Think of these root-level topics as *domains*.

Next, ask yourself what the related topics are. Why do people buy smartphone accessories? What are their concerns? What purposes do these products serve? What are the alternatives? What are the most important features or qualities?

As a solution provider, you're used to solution-side thinking; you're at the end of the chain. Your customers started their journey long before this, though, and you want to be visible to them as early in the process as possible. In some instances, this may be before they even know they have a need or a problem.

Let's say your company sells cases and screen protectors for Apple and Samsung phones. The problems that lead people to buy a case or a screen protector are pretty obvious, but some of the alternative perspectives aren't. Your customer may be someone who's dropped an expensive mobile device and their search query is for a repair option, but consciously or subconsciously they're also asking themselves how they can

prevent this from happening again. That's a great time to show up in their search results.

A contextually similar but topically separate concern is water damage. If someone is searching for how to tell if their phone has been water damaged, or how to properly dry out a phone that fell into a toilet, that's also a great time for your waterproof phone cases to show up in their search results. They aren't looking for a waterproof smartphone case right now, and in fact they may not even know that such things exist until they see your site come up in search results for *What kind of rice should you use to dry out a soaked iPhone?*

Insurance is an alternative path that someone might explore after suffering a smartphone loss, but it's expensive. You might position your products as a cheaper preventative option to a monthly insurance fee. You could potentially get a lot of sales from ranking highly in the results for a query like *Is smartphone insurance worth it?* even though it's only tangentially related to the products you sell.

So, your related topics might be:

- *smartphone screen damage*
- *smartphone protection*
- *smartphone insurance*
- *waterproof case*
- *iPhone compatibility*
- *Samsung compatibility*
- *stylish case*

These aren't keywords, they're classifications for keywords (though there may be some overlap between the two). Since keywords will eventually provide more context, you can simplify and generalize your topics as follows, by assuming that they are subsets of your domain (which is *smartphone cases* in this example):

- *screen damage*
- *protection*
- *insurance*
- *waterproof*
- *water damage*
- *iPhone*
- *Samsung*
- *style*

Among these, are there any that would apply to a disproportionately large number of other topics (what in mathematical terms would be described as topics with a *high cardinality*)? In our example, the two that stand out are *Samsung* and *iPhone*, because (assuming you only sell cases for these two brands) one and only one of them will always apply to every other topic. When you discover these *superset* topics, make note of them and keep them separate from the main list. When you start building out your keyword spreadsheet, you'll create columns for each of them so that you can do fine-grained sorting and filtering.

With the realization that *Samsung* and *iPhone* together span 100% of your topics list but have no overlap, it makes sense to go one level lower to their common domain: *device brand*. Even if you have a few products that are brand agnostic (such as a screen protector that is compatible with some iPhone and Samsung models), the taxonomy still requires one and only one phone brand per keyword because people will only search for one or the other.

NOTE

This example exposes some interesting problems with keywords. First, the internal company product taxonomy is different from the keyword list taxonomy because the latter must be governed by search intent. Second, if you have products that are compatible with multiple brands and models, you may have to have a different product page for each model, even though it's the same product from your perspective. If your product page lists 20 different models that this item is compatible with, then it's not optimized for searches on any of those models. For instance, a smartphone screen cleaning kit may be compatible with all mobile devices, but if you want it to rank highly for *iphone 14 screen cleaner*, you'll have to create a product page that is optimized only for that keyword (or perhaps just for *iphone screen cleaner*, but we'll get to that level of detail later in this chapter).

Now take another look at the topic list. Are there any other high-cardinality topics that you might want to drill down into and sort by? In our example, the only item that jumps out is *style*. Everything else is a Boolean; a case is either waterproof or it isn't, and *screen damage*, *water damage*, *insurance*, and *protection* refer to searches peripheral to your products. *Style*, however, has several important subcategories: color, materials, thickness, hardness, special features. Among those, you could drill down even further. If you think that you'll need to sort your keyword list by any of those subtopics, then mark this as a superset. If you end up being wrong, no big deal—it's easy to add or remove spreadsheet columns later.

When the remaining topics have a similar cardinality, or if it doesn't make sense to break them down any further right now, then whatever's left is your general list of topics. This is as far as you need to drill down in this example. There's more work to do later, but at this point the foundation is solid.

TIP

If you're having trouble coming up with topics, refer to "Researching Trends, Topics, and Seasonality" on page 17.

Preparing Your Keyword Plan Spreadsheet

If your keyword list is not yet in a spreadsheet, then now is the time to migrate to one. Start with a new file. Label your first worksheet *Raw Keywords*, and put every keyword

you've come up with into column A. This is only an initial, unrefined list of potential search terms.

A quick reminder: *keyword* is a general term for a group of related words that will be used in a search query. For example, here are four separate but similar keywords of varying lengths:

- *pink waterproof iphone case*
- *pink iphone case*
- *waterproof iphone case*
- *iphone case*

Many of your keywords will be as similar as those are. Even though they're almost the same, and may lead to largely the same set of results, they all have different search data associated with them and will provide different levels of value and opportunity. In fact, you could simply change the word order of each and come up with four more keywords, all with different search data. For now, go with whatever makes sense to you. When in doubt, choose the keyword that most resembles a natural language question.

NOTE

This is not the final list; you only need it to "prime the pump," so to speak, so don't exhaust yourself trying to think of every possible search query. When you eventually load these raw keywords into your preferred SEO platform(s), you'll be able to see the traffic levels, rankings, and difficulties for them and their many variations, so there's no sense in trying to go further than this right now.

Next, create a new worksheet tab called *Keyword Plan*. This will be your main worksheet containing your refined list of keywords and their metadata. For now, all you need to do is set up the structure. At the top of this worksheet, create a 10 × 2 table with a header, and populate the header row with the following titles:

- Keyword
- Monthly search volume
- Priority
- Relevance
- Difficulty
- Rank
- CPC
- Superset
- Topic
- Persona
- URL

The *Keyword* column will contain the refined list of worthwhile keywords that you'll eventually import from an SEO platform or search data provider.

NOTE

Don't put your raw keywords here; put them in the Raw Keywords worksheet.

Monthly search volume is exactly what it sounds like: the average search volume for the previous 12 months. Many SEO platforms can also provide indications of seasonality, or seasonal monthly changes in search volume.

Relevance refers to a subjective assessment of how relevant this keyword is to your current page content. This will be covered in more detail in "Keyword Valuation" on page 18.

Priority is either a flag or a rating that identifies topics and keywords that are of major importance to your company, usually in alignment with your company's major business objectives, marketing initiatives, and/or sales targets. This is also covered in more detail in the "Keyword Valuation" section.

Keyword difficulty (sometimes called *Keyword competition*) refers to the relative amount of competition for this keyword. If a lot of sites are fighting over the same keyword, then it has a high degree of difficulty. It will take more work to place higher in the SERP for that keyword, and ads will cost significantly more. For instance, in our example, the broad keyword *iphone case* will almost certainly have more competition (and therefore a higher keyword difficulty rating) than the more specific *pink waterproof iphone case*. There are a few different ways to represent keyword difficulty, depending on which data provider you use (that's covered later in this chapter), but the easiest standard to conform to is a scale from 1 to 100.

Rank refers to the SERP position that a page on your site (which is specified in the *URL* column) currently has for this keyword. These columns are not strictly required right now, but you'll need them later so that you can see your progress. Ranking data comes from SEO platforms that analyze your site. Other keyword research tools may only provide nonsite-specific data for keyword popularity, difficulty, and CPC, which is all you need to develop an initial keyword plan. If your pages are mostly unranked (or ranked very low), or if you are launching a new site, then these columns will be empty anyway. Most data providers only include the top 100 pages for each keyword, so this column will usually be a range from 1 to 100.

CPC is the amount of money you'd pay for a click-through on an ad that targets this keyword. If you don't have access to good data for keyword difficulty, you can generally use CPC as a substitute, though ideally you'll have both.

The *Superset* column is a placeholder for a high-cardinality topic. In the previous example we defined two supersets: *device brand* and *style*. That means you'd rename this column *Device brand* and create a second *Style* column. Add a column for each superset that you defined.

Topic refers to the refined list of topics that you created earlier. This sheet is for keywords, though, so in this context a topic is a *dimension* of a keyword—a category to which it belongs. That means you have to list your topics somewhere else. Create

a third worksheet tab labeled *Topics and Supersets*. In it, convert column A into a table with the name *topics_list*. Change the column title from *Column1* to *All Topics*. Then go back to your *Keyword Plan* worksheet, select the *Topic* column, use the Data Validation feature to allow only a list, and use this formula as a source:

```
=INDIRECT("topics_list[All Topics]")
```

This will avoid potential filtering problems by strictly enforcing the correct nomenclature in the *Topic* column. This makes filtering easier, and it also makes it possible to pivot the data table to aggregate all the keywords for each topic, which you may find useful later. If you want to add new topics in the future, you must add them to the *All Topics* column in the *Topics and Supersets* worksheet.

Repeat this process for each of your supersets (go to your *Topics and Supersets* worksheet, add a new column to the *topics_list* table for each of your supersets, retitle the columns to match each superset, populate each column with the items in those lists, and enable Data Validation for the corresponding columns in the *Keyword Plan* worksheet).

NOTE

If the data validation becomes burdensome at any point, disable it.

Persona refers to the customer avatars or personas you created or acquired from someone else at the company back in Chapter 5. You may find value in repeating the data validation process for the *Persona* column (and creating another worksheet tab for *Personas*), since that could be considered an abstraction of the *customers* domain. This is probably a column you would want to filter, sort, and pivot by. If you chose not to create customer avatars, then you can remove this column.

The *URL* column will contain the URL of the page that this keyword is currently ranking for. If a page is unranked, this will be blank. This column isn't required for developing an initial keyword plan, but it's useful later. For example, it can be used to determine which pages have the most striking distance opportunity based on the quality and search volume of the keywords for which they rank in the top 20 positions.

Depending on the nature of your site and your industry, you may want to consider adding a column that identifies a keyword as being either *Branded* or *Nonbranded*. This is just a flag for branded keywords; you can mark it with an *X* or a *1* or whatever you prefer. No search data will be imported into these cells. The reason we do this is because you should not need to focus on optimizing your site for keywords that include your brand name unless your business is very small or very new.

You now have the basic spreadsheet framework to build out your keyword plan. You may want to make a copy of this file to use as a template for future projects. To the extent that it is relevant to your project, try to create the spreadsheet exactly as described, even if you think that you won't use some of this data. You won't truly know what you will and won't need in your keyword plan until the project is complete, and every project has different needs.

Internal Resources for Keyword Research

In Chapter 4 we covered a variety of third-party tools that can help you identify topics, keywords, and questions. Eventually this is where your keyword data will come from, but it works best when you provide a comprehensive list of raw keywords as a "seed." In addition to your own brainstorming, there are many potential keyword resources in-house.

It may be useful to make note of your sources. If so, go ahead and create a *Source* column in your *Raw Keywords* worksheet to identify where or whom the idea for each keyword came from. It isn't critical that you keep track of this, but it could be helpful during future keyword reviews, or for other marketing purposes beyond SEO.

Gathering this kind of intelligence is what a traditional marketer might have done prior to initiating a marketing campaign before the web existed. And of course, if any of this data is available to you from other departments of the company, be sure to incorporate it.

Web Logs, Search Console Reports, and Analytics

Collect all internal web traffic data you possibly can. If you can get a CSV export of useful data, do it, and add it as a new tab in your keyword spreadsheet.

The most valuable web visitor data from Google comes not from Google Analytics but from Google Search Console, in the form of clicks and impressions data from search queries. That's because Google does not pass keyword data through to your website, and as a result a web analytics package generally can't list the search queries or keywords from incoming search traffic.

TIP

There are tools that can get keyword-based data. Keyword Hero, for example, was specifically designed to provide data about on-site user behavior per keyword in Google Analytics. It shows you how users respond to each landing page, per search query, as well as to your website at large for each keyword. So, you'll get everything from behavioral metrics to performance metrics such as conversions and revenue per keyword.

Additionally, page-level information about site traffic is potentially useful, including visitor counts (daily, monthly, and seasonal), locations, and platforms (browser and operating system); bounce rates; inbound link (or "referrer") URLs; direct link URLs to assets such as images or videos; and 404 "page not found" errors.

Competitive Analysis

Your competitors face the same challenges with keyword research and content optimization, and unless you are very lucky, they are probably also resourceful and creative. Even if they haven't invested in SEO, at the very least you can expect that they've put a lot of effort into learning about their customers and the best ways to appeal to them.

Review your competitors' websites, and try to determine the keywords and phrases they're targeting for the products and services that compete with yours. Look for unique variations and synonyms they use in their content. Do these unique terms indicate shifting trends in the vernacular of your industry? Are they obviously optimizing for certain keywords? What nonbrand terms do they use for their business? Have they written any articles or blog posts? What does the media say about them?

People

Every employee could have valuable insight into the thoughts and actions of your customers. You'll find a lot of value in talking to them, not just to get ideas for keywords, but also to reveal gaps in the concepts and terminology used by your organization and your customers.

Some basic questions you might ask are:

- What are the words and phrases that define our business and its products or services?

- What words and phrases do customers use when they talk about our products or services?

- What are the questions that prospects and customers ask us?

- What are the questions that people ask before they connect with us?

- Do you see gaps in how we talk about our products or services and how customers see their needs?

The following sections describe the different people you might want to consult.

You

Before you meet with anyone, consider your topics, then generate an initial list of terms and phrases that you think are relevant to your industry and what your site or business offers. Include all of your various past and present brand names, products,

and services. If your site has a massive number of products, consider stepping back a level (or two) and listing the lower-level categories and subcategories.

Aim to come up with at least a hundred keywords and phrases that could potentially be used in a search query by relevant, qualified customers or visitors. Ideally you'll come up with a list (or a series of lists) that looks a lot like Bubba's lengthy enumeration of the many ways that "the fruit of the sea" can be prepared in the movie *Forrest Gump:*

- *barbecue shrimp*
- *boiled shrimp*
- *broiled shrimp*
- *baked shrimp*
- *sauteed shrimp*
- *shrimp kabobs*
- *shrimp Creole*

- *shrimp gumbo*
- *pan-fried shrimp*
- *deep-fried shrimp*
- *shrimp stir-fry*
- *pineapple shrimp*
- *lemon shrimp*
- *shrimp and potatoes*

(This assumes that *shrimp* is the common entity.)

For now, stick to broad two- or three-word phrases like these. You can drill down into one keyword and expand it with relevant peripheral words and disambiguations if you really want to, but generally it's best to do that later, when you have access to search data. You wouldn't want to spend an hour thinking of 50 more keywords based on *lemon shrimp* if that isn't what your business wants to target, or if it ends up being a low-volume, low-opportunity topic.

Employees across the company

If the business is small enough that it's logistically possible to call an all-hands meeting to brainstorm for keywords, then this could be a good next step.

You're not going to get everything you need from an all-hands meeting, of course; this is just a starting point to get everyone thinking about keywords and questions. Ask people to email you more suggestions as they think of them, and schedule some breakout sessions for employees or departments who are particularly motivated to help with keyword research.

You can also arrange to send out an email survey to everyone at the company. This is a fairly low-effort option, but you likely won't get as much participation as you would from a face-to-face meeting.

Beyond your current keyword research mission, this process also reveals the departments and individuals who care most about search traffic and website performance.

You might consider forming a working group or committee for those who want to participate in future keyword reviews.

Marketers

Technically speaking, SEO is a form of marketing, so the people in the marketing department should have a great deal of insight for you, especially in terms of traditional marketing data. You should already be working with your company's marketers by this point, unless you're an outside SEO consultant—in which case we advise you to engage with the entire marketing department, not just your point of contact. Someone might have done some of this research already and produced a keyword list that you can work with.

Ask if there are any upcoming product launches or marketing campaigns that you can align with your SEO efforts.

Be wary of letting marketing-speak and insider jargon slip into your keyword list. Marketers try to create a certain impression in customers' minds by using specific terms, but the language that customers actually use may be quite different.

Salespeople

No one talks to customers more than the people in sales. They're familiar with the exact language that customers use, the problems people are trying to solve by buying a product, the most common questions people ask before buying, and related concerns such as price, reliability, warranty, returns, and support. Specifics are important in keyword research, which is why it's a good idea to talk to sales after you've talked to marketing. For instance, the people in marketing may have said that *affordable* is a good keyword, but the salespeople may say that customers most commonly say or respond to *cheapest* or *least expensive* instead. It's too early to make judgments, though, so for now include all three. You'll identify the highest-value keywords later, and filter out the duds.

It's also useful to ask the salespeople for feedback on the company's marketing efforts. Which parts of the marketing funnel are delivering qualified leads? Which aren't? Marketing is supposed to enable the sales team, but there can be some disconnection—and sometimes even some resentment—between them.

Whereas marketing, user experience design, and product management roles may have formal personas or avatars that represent ideal customers, people in sales may have their own informal labels. For instance a frequent, big-spending customer might be referred to as a "whale," and a past customer may be labeled as an "upgrader" or an existing one as a "renewal." Each of these classes may use entirely different terminology. If you inherited customer avatars from the marketing department, for example, it would be a good idea to modify them to align with the sales perspective.

Engineering/product (a.k.a. IT)

The system administrator and/or webmaster will know if there is any internal data that might be useful to you. In addition to the web logs and analytics services that we've already mentioned, the IT department will probably also have access to records from your site's built-in search function. The on-site search queries of existing visitors and customers are a keyword gold mine. If your site doesn't have on-site search, consider implementing Google's Programmable Search Engine.

Support/customer service

The support department is more of a resource for content creation ideas than keyword research, but it's still useful to ask what words and phrases customers use and what questions they ask when talking about the product. Customers who contact customer service may fit into specific categories. If so, revise your avatars to account for this perspective.

Support personnel are a window into the problems and known issues with your products. As much as the marketing leadership would like to pretend these don't exist, in reality your customers are probably searching for ways to deal with them. Your job is to direct those searches to good content, so you need to know what they are. As painful as it may be, you should (perhaps secretly) append the word *sucks* to your branded keywords. If people are searching for your product name and *sucks*, then you should be aware of it. You might also include other negative terms, like *scam*, *unreliable*, and *rip-off*, or whatever might apply to what your business sells.

It's also a good idea to add *support* to your branded keywords. If your customers need product support, you want your support page to be found—and you certainly don't want your competitors' sales pages to rank above it.

Founders and owners

They started this company for a reason, right? What's their story? What problem did they set out to solve? What's the next step for the company? What do they want its public image to be? Answers to questions like these can inform your keyword plan.

Customers

If you have access to existing customers, it's useful to ask them how they found your site. Some organizations include this question as part of the closing or checkout process. You can also set up a survey on your site, or send one as an email follow-up after the sale. Some people like to offer discounts for customers who complete surveys; be aware that while this will get you more survey responses, it'll also add a lot of junk and bias to the data, which could lead you astray.

Not everyone finds your site through a search engine, so customer feedback is not always directly useful for discovering keywords. Indirectly, however, the process that a customer followed up to the sale can reveal valuable keywords that you might not have expected. For instance, before buying a new video card from your PC retail site, a customer may have read a review on Tom's Hardware, then asked questions about it in the forum. The names of websites and publications peripheral to your business may make good keywords, and discussion forums are an excellent source of relevant customer questions.

> ── **NOTE** ────────────────────────────────
>
> Try to talk to representatives from each of your customer avatars.

Noncustomers

Sometimes it helps to get a fresh, unbiased perspective. So far everyone you've talked to is an insider. What would someone outside of this industry search for if they wanted to buy a product you sell?

At some point, most or all of your customers were new to your industry. What was their search journey like? You can also get a broader perspective by looking up industry associations and media sites that pertain to your business. What language are they using when they talk about this subject?

External Resources for Keyword Research

By this point you should have a substantial list of raw keywords. The next step is to use third-party keyword research tools to find similar search terms. We covered the most important ones in Chapter 4, but there are a few niche keyword research tools that you should consider in addition to one or more full-service SEO platforms or data providers, especially if your company or client relies heavily on mobile search traffic and/or seasonal trends.

Researching Natural Language Questions

Natural language searches are important for all search methods, but they're critical for mobile search marketing. Compared to desktop users, people searching from a mobile device are far more likely to speak their queries than type them. In these cases, there is a higher tendency to use natural language questions or prepositions—statements that imply questions—instead of search-friendly keywords.

As shown in Figure 6-1, by 2019, over a quarter of mobile users worldwide were using voice search (note, however, that this doesn't indicate that users are doing all of their searches by voice; this statistic includes people using voice search at least once per month). Nonetheless, use of voice to conduct search queries, improvements in

ranking algorithms, people's desire to ask their questions of a search engine naturally, and other factors are contributing to a rise in natural language queries. Data released by Google in 2022 shows that it has seen a 60% increase in natural language queries since 2015.

Figure 6-1. *Percent of mobile users using voice search*

If you can, try to have at least one corresponding natural language question for every keyword in your list. Ideally you'd have a series of related questions that refine the search scope; Google calls this process a *journey*, and it saves the context of each user's journey so that it can provide pre-refined results if they come back to it in the future. The idea here is that searchers aren't seeking a single, objective answer; they're subjectively evaluating many possible answers by following their curiosity and exploring a topic over a period of time. An efficient SEO strategy includes engaging with those searchers as early in their search journey as possible.

For instance, consider the previous example of keywords for smartphone accessories. Thinking about the domain and the topics within it, we came up with two good natural language questions that could lead to an accessory sale:

- What kind of rice should you use to dry out a soaked iPhone?
- Is smartphone insurance worth it?

Let's work with the first one. Is this really the first question in someone's search journey? If we go back a step or two, some better starting points might be:

- Is the iPhone waterproof?
- What do I do with a wet iPhone?
- How do I dry out an iPhone?
- Will an iPhone work if you drop it in a pool?

The next level might be:

- Does AppleCare cover water damage?
- What does it cost to repair iPhone water damage?
- What kind of rice should you use to dry a soaked iPhone?
- Can I trade in a waterlogged iPhone?

Remember: the goal here is to sell a waterproof iPhone case. Some of these questions are reactive, and some are proactive. Either way, the people who ask these questions are probably interested in a waterproof iPhone case, even if they aren't directly searching for it yet. They may not even know it exists, in which case your content will shape their first impression.

Another great example is baby furniture and clothing. If that's what you're selling, the search journey might start with questions like:

- What baby names are most popular?
- How much maternity leave will I need?
- How much does a full-term pregnancy cost?

At some point later in this search journey, the person who asked these questions will need a crib, crib accessories, a night light, a rocking chair, and baby clothes—things your site sells. They aren't searching for them right now; they will be, but they haven't gotten around to thinking about these items yet, so this is your chance to get in front of this future customer ahead of your competitors.

Another path to consider is a parent who is having a second (or more) child. They might ask:

- Can I reuse my old crib for my new baby?
- Is my car seat still legal?
- Are used baby clothes safe?

If you're stumped, or if you want as many questions in your list as possible, consider the third-party tools described in the following subsections.

TIP

SEO platforms like Rank Ranger, Ahrefs, and Moz Pro are also excellent sources for natural language questions.

AlsoAsked

This site analyzes your natural language questions and returns a mind map of all related questions in the search journey. You can drill down into each related question if the topic is too broad.

This service is free to use on a limited exploratory basis, but if you want to export to CSV (which you'll need to do in order to import the list into your spreadsheet), you'll have to upgrade to a paid account.

The AlsoAsked data comes from Google's People Also Ask SERP feature.

AnswerThePublic

This site analyzes a proposed topic and returns a mind map of the most popular natural language questions and prepositions within it.

This service is free to use on a limited exploratory basis, but the paid version includes historical reporting, "listening alerts" (notifications of changes for the topics you're tracking), CSV export (required for importing data to your spreadsheet), and extensive training materials.

AnswerThePublic gets its data from Google's autocomplete feature. A similar tool that is completely free is AnswerSocrates.com.

Researching Trends, Topics, and Seasonality

A *trend* is a pattern of increasing and/or decreasing activity that is supported by historical data. *Seasonality* is a trend that recurs based on well-defined and predictable conditions. If you have enough data, then both of these concepts are easily established with ordinary keyword research and analytical tools. (There's more detail on this topic in "Trending and Seasonality" on page 25.)

Hopefully your company's marketing department has already done plenty of research to define past trends and seasonality, and it's available to you to use. If not, or if you're launching an entirely new business, then this is a bit out of scope for an SEO project; seasonal market research and planning is a whole-company effort.

Emerging trends are much more difficult to plan for because current events cause keywords to fluctuate on a daily basis. Google Trends can help you recognize short-term spikes in keyword demand, so if you believe you're seeing an emerging trend, you can check it there. Google processes over 5 billion queries per day, approximately 15% of which are new. It takes at least a day for search data to trickle into most keyword research sites, so there is a lot of variance and volatility with relatively new keywords, and regardless of how much traffic data you collect, at best you're getting an approximation of yesterday's search volume for any given keyword. Trends don't start or end on search engines, though, so if you really want to know what's trending today, you'll have to rely on other data sources. In addition to Google Trends (which was covered in Chapter 4), the following subsections provide a few suggestions.

X (formerly Twitter)

X describes itself as "what's happening and what people are talking about right now." The sidebar tracks the current most popular trending topics, accounts, and hashtags, and the Explore feature has several sorting options for researching emerging trends.

Hashtags don't usually make good keywords, but they can inspire some ideas for good keywords and topics.

BuzzSumo

BuzzSumo allows the marketer to "see how much interest brands and content generate in the wild." The suite includes tools to research keywords, track brand mentions, and identify influencers, but it's best known for its ability to spot trends and viral content as they take off. It provides a window into what content is trending right now, not just overall, but also by topic or keyword. Armed with this information, a content marketer is well-positioned to "newsjack" on trending topics before their competitors.

Soovle

Soovle is a web-based keyword research tool that aggregates results from other search engines. When you enter a topic or keyword, it shows you the most popular related search queries on several sites, most notably YouTube, Amazon, Wikipedia, and Answers.com. People often search these sites because they want to learn more about something they've heard about recently, and that's not necessarily what they'd go to Google to look for, so Soovle's results page may be more likely to show evidence of emerging trends before they show up in Google's keyword data (though Soovle does show Google and Bing results as well).

Even if you're not trying to capitalize on an emerging trend, Soovle is still an overall excellent source of inspiration for keywords and topics.

Keyword Valuation

Up to this point, your keyword research has mostly focused on building your raw keywords and topics lists. The initial brainstorming phase is now complete. You've identified your topics and collected a lot of potentially relevant keywords and questions, but you don't yet know which ones represent actionable and profitable SEO opportunities for your site. While they may be relevant, some may not be attainable (the cost of optimizing for them may be too high), and some may not have enough search volume (the benefit of optimizing for them may be too low).

The hierarchy of importance for keyword valuation is:

1. *Priority*. Keywords that serve a major business objective, sales goal, branding initiative, or other critical marketing purpose should be considered above everything else.

2. *Relevance*. You only want to rank for keywords that are highly relevant to your site's content. Low-relevance keywords are not necessarily bad, but they should be moved to a separate list in case you need them later.

3. *Popularity*. You only want to optimize for keywords that are used in a measurable number of actual searches. High-relevance but low-popularity keywords should

be filtered out (hidden in your spreadsheet) but not deleted, because they may become popular in the future.

4. *Difficulty*. If the cost of acquiring traffic is higher than the benefit of converting it, then you're wasting money. High-difficulty keywords that are highly relevant to your site can be broken down into variations that represent more efficient opportunities.

To obtain these metrics, you'll combine search data from SEO platforms with your own subjective ratings for topics and keywords. If you have tens of thousands of keywords, then this is going to take a lot of time and patience—but that's part of the job; it's what you're being paid to do.

The following subsections offer more detail on each of these points.

Importing Keyword Data

Before you go any further, you must populate your *Keyword Plan* worksheet with useful search data. Good data isn't free—or if it is, then it has limited utility—so don't skimp on this part. Bad data will lead to bad decisions that will waste time and money, possibly get your site penalized, and maybe get you fired. In SEO, it's better to have no data than bad data, and it's better to do nothing than to do the wrong thing.

We provided some suggestions for search data providers in Chapter 4. You only need one good source, but if you have the budget for it, you may benefit from combining data from several different providers. Regardless of which service(s) you use, you must at least be able to upload your list of raw keywords to them and export recent search data about those keywords to a CSV file with columns that include:

- *Monthly search volume*

- *Keyword difficulty* (a.k.a. "keyword competition")

- *CPC* (nice to have, especially if a keyword difficulty score isn't provided)

- *Current rank* (if there is one)

- *URL* (of the page corresponding to the current rank)

If there are other metrics that you have good data for, add columns for them.

NOTE

We'll just refer to your export file as a CSV (comma separated values) file since that's supported by all of the keyword research tools that we use, but many of the tools also support the Microsoft Excel format, and other spreadsheet file formats that will work just as well for raw search data. Export to the format that is most useful to you. For example, Excel files support many useful functions such as filtering, multiple sheets, pivot tables, and more.

Once you have a CSV file with the exported search data, open your *Keyword Plan* spreadsheet. Create a new worksheet tab and rename it to *Data Import* (or something that reflects where you got it from, such as *Semrush Import*), then import the CSV data into it (using a spreadsheet function, or plain old copy and paste) and modify the headings and the order of the columns to match what's in your *Keyword Plan* worksheet. Alternatively, you may find it easier to reorder the headings in your *Keyword Plan* spreadsheet to match the data export columns.

TIP

If you're a spreadsheet expert, you can write a formula that pulls data into each *Keyword Plan* column from the appropriate equivalent in the *Data Import* worksheet. Assuming column A is for keywords and column B is for monthly search volume, then this formula would copy the search volume data from the *Data Import* worksheet to the same column in the *Keyword Plan* worksheet:

```
=VLOOKUP(A2, 'Data Import'!$A$1:$B$49995, 2,FALSE)
```

Repeat this process for all other data columns.

Evaluating Relevance

At a glance your entire keyword list might seem perfectly relevant to the topics you defined, but keep in mind that relevance is relative. A keyword might be highly relevant to your site's current content but have low relevance to your business model (or vice versa). Seasonal keywords fluctuate in relevance throughout the year, and some branded keywords will become less relevant when products are retired or replaced with newer models.

Low-relevance keywords aren't necessarily lost opportunities; they're just not at peak value right now. When searchers click on your site and find the content to be valuable, they're likely to remember your brand, bookmark the page so they can return to it later, and potentially link to it when suggesting it to a friend. Low-relevance keywords, therefore, can present good opportunities to strengthen the branding of your site. This type of brand value can lead to return visits by those users when they are more likely to convert. Seasonal keywords also may be qualified as low-relevance outside of the season, but they could be highly relevant when laying the groundwork for the next season.

To identify currently relevant, high-quality keywords, ask yourself the following questions:

What is the search intent?
　　As discussed in Chapter 1, there are three major kinds of query intentions:

- Transactional: someone is actively seeking to initiate a conversion (buy something, sign up for something, etc.).

- Navigational: someone is looking for a specific brand, product, or service.
- Informational: someone is seeking general information on a topic, or researching in preparation for making an upcoming (but not immediate) buying decision.

How closely is this keyword related to the content, services, products, or information currently on your site?

If you're selling smartphone cases, you may end up with some keywords that seemed like they might be relevant, but actually aren't. For instance, *iphone 14 data plans* doesn't apply to any of your product pages. The search intent doesn't align with your current content. Perhaps you intended to write an article on this topic (which might be a great idea), but never got around to it. Under the right conditions this could be a relevant keyword, but presently it is not.

If searchers use this keyword in a query and click through to your site from a SERP, what is the likelihood that they will convert?

Conversion rate is directly related to how accurately your content matches searcher intent (though there are other factors as well). So, if you do get around to writing that comparison review of various iPhone 14 data plans (with an extra section that explains how some iPhone 14 cases might affect the signal in positive and negative ways), you're reasonably well aligned with the searcher's intent. Traffic for that keyword may or may not convert—you'll have to keep a close eye on it. This does not mean that you shouldn't have or create a page to address the keyword. Ranking for relevant informational keywords is a great way to catch users at the beginning of their customer journey and build loyalty so that you can grab that conversion later.

How many people who search for this term will come to your site and leave dissatisfied?

If your title or snippet promises a comprehensive comparison review of iPhone 14 data plans, you have to deliver that or else the visitor will quickly leave. Don't take the position that more eyes on your site will necessarily lead to more conversions (either now or the future). You want to attract qualified leads. "Getting more people in through the door means more sales" is a brick-and-mortar retail store theory that relies on customers having to invest time and energy into physically traveling to your store, which doesn't translate well to the web because it takes no effort to close a tab or click the back button.

Web analytics can tell you if you're delivering what you promise. A high bounce rate on a page indicates that your content did not meet visitors' expectations, though there could also be a usability or technical issue at fault. Be aware, though, that informational content tends to have a higher bounce rate, and that's OK if it's relevant and people are getting value from it.

Some keyword research tools offer their own proprietary "relevance" or "relevancy" score for search terms. This is not quite the same "relevance" that we're talking about in this section. Third-party relevance scores are a measure of how many times a keyword appears in the overall search volume of its main parent topic or keyword (if you're researching similar terms). This can be useful for keyword research within a specific topic, and for finding related keywords, but it isn't a good metric to use for keyword valuation.

Instead of relying on a third-party score, think about your customer avatars and their search intents, your conversion goals, and the alignment between your keywords and your page content, then develop your own relevance scoring system. We suggest a scale from 1 to 3, with 1 being a highly relevant transactional query (likely to convert), 2 being a reasonably relevant navigational query (may convert), and 3 being a broad informational query (not likely to convert right now, but maybe later) or a seasonal keyword that is currently in the off-season.

Start at the top of your *Keyword Plan* worksheet and add a score to the *Relevance* column for all of your keywords.

Priority Ratings for Business Objectives

Similar to relevance scoring, you may also benefit from a subjective priority rating scheme to override or bias the standard cost/benefit ratio.

There are a lot of different ways to represent priority, depending on the details of your business and what you want to sort and filter by. Are there certain keywords you want to rank highly for, no matter how difficult or costly it is? All other things being equal, are there certain topics or keywords that are a top priority for your business? If two keywords from two different topics have the same cost and benefit, and you can only focus on one, which would it be?

The best scoring method for this metric is one that closely matches your company's processes and culture. Many companies define an official hierarchy of *major business objectives* (MBOs) on a quarterly or yearly basis. Marketing departments have a list of priorities as well, and sales departments often have monthly and quarterly targets for certain product groups or services. If nothing else, then you should at least have an idea of the relative benefit of each conversion type, or an estimate of how much each is worth. (If you only have one value for all conversions, then you probably don't need to assign priority ratings, and can skip to the next section.)

Using those sources, develop a basic rating system for your topics and keywords that reflects your company's current priorities. There are several ways to do this. We suggest one of these:

- Use a simple Boolean flag (such as a different cell color, or the letter X) to indicate equally high-priority items; all unflagged items are equally low priority.

- Use a numeric scale, from 1 to however many MBOs there are.

- Approach it from a product management perspective—create a list of MBOs (using short names) and assign one or more of them to each keyword or topic.

In your *Keyword Plan* worksheet, start at the top and assign scores or flags in the *Priority* column for each keyword (or just the topics, if that suits you better).

Filtering Out Low-Traffic Keywords

Low-traffic keywords are generally not worth the effort of optimization, but as with so many other things in SEO, it depends on the context and the specifics of your situation. There are reasonable scenarios where currently low-popularity keywords are worth targeting.

The first and most obvious one is to get ahead of an emerging trend, season, or future event. A lot of big events, like the Olympics and the Super Bowl, are planned many years or months in advance. Long before anyone knows who will be competing in these events, you already know what they are, and when and where they will be held. Likewise, the best time to start optimizing for the next back-to-school season is shortly after the previous one ends, when the competition for traffic has died down. (There's more on this subject in "Trending and Seasonality" on page 25.)

You might also want to lay the groundwork for an upcoming product launch or marketing campaign. This can be tricky, though, if some of your keywords contain embargoed information.

As explained in detail in the previous chapter, a long-tail keyword strategy involves targeting a high number of keywords that individually have relatively low traffic, but collectively offer a lot of opportunity. In this case, try to figure out what the worthwhile traffic threshold should be. This is subjective, but there's definitely a point at which the numbers are so low that the majority of the measurable search traffic is probably just noise from automated queries that haven't been filtered out of the dataset. The irony of SEO data providers like Semrush and Ahrefs (and their upstream partners) is that their keyword data collection scripts are responsible for a certain amount of the search traffic that they're reporting. Even if they try to filter out their own queries, they can't always filter out their competitors'. Every time you test a query or examine a SERP, you're adding to those numbers as well. So in most cases, any keyword with only a handful of monthly searches for a big market like the US should be a candidate for exclusion unless you have a good reason for keeping it. If you're unsure, and if the conversion potential seems high, then test it—the cost of ranking for a low-traffic keyword is intrinsically low.

Don't delete low-traffic keywords; filter them out instead by using your spreadsheet's filter function on the *Monthly search volume* column in your *Keyword Plan* spreadsheet. If they're relevant, then they may become more valuable in the future.

Breaking Down High-Difficulty Keywords

Keyword difficulty can be calculated in a variety of ways, which is why each SEO platform has its own special scoring system for it. Typically it's a function of one or more of the following data points, weighted according to a top-secret proprietary formula: search volume, number of results, backlink count, and paid ad CPC. On their own, each of these is a weak indicator of keyword competition, but collectively they become more reliable, so you'll want to incorporate as many of them as possible when calculating your keyword difficulty score. You can do this on your own in your *Keyword Plan* spreadsheet, or you can rely solely on the difficulty or competition score from an SEO platform.

NOTE

Your data must be *normalized* (meaning all metrics are converted to the same scale) before you can use it to calculate a difficulty score. You can do this in Excel via the *STANDARDIZE*, *AVERAGE*, and *STDEV.P* functions.

High-difficulty keywords don't usually represent good opportunities. They're high volume, but can be low relevance. If they're too broad, they will bring in a lot of useless traffic with a high bounce rate and few conversions. If they are specific enough to generate qualified leads, then the cost of acquiring them may be too high for the return on conversions.

Regardless, if you don't already have a salvageable SERP placement for a popular keyword (or sometimes even if you do), then it's going to be a costly battle to get into the top 10 (which is where 95% of SERP clicks are). It's initially much more efficient to break it down into more specific long-tail terms that are cheaper and easier to target, and hopefully represent a higher return in aggregate. If you have the brand, budget, or content to compete for those high-competition keywords and you believe they offer a lot of potential, then by all means pursue them, but be prepared to invest a lot of time and effort to succeed.

Going back to our shrimp example, let's say that *shrimp stir-fry* is one of the most popular search terms in your list, with several indicators of very high difficulty. You can reduce the difficulty by breaking it out into related keywords, phrases, and questions that are more closely associated with specific products or content on your site (and are therefore more relevant as well), such as:

- *shrimp stir-fry recipe*
- *shrimp stir-fry recipe "low sodium"*

- *how to cook shrimp stir-fry*
- *how much fat is in shrimp stir-fry?*
- *what seasoning do I use for shrimp stir-fry?*

- *gluten-free shrimp stir-fry*
- *best oil for shrimp stir-fry*
- *wok for shrimp stir-fry*

TIP

The best way to do this is through one of the SEO platforms we've recommended. You could do it on your own, but if you have access to good data, why aren't you using it?

Next, check for potentially valuable disambiguations and alternate spellings and phrasings. Hyphenation, verb tenses, and singular/plural variations of high-difficulty keywords can provide additional opportunities to go after. For example:

- *shrimp stirfry*
- *stirfried shrimp*
- *stir-fried shrimp*

- *shrip stir-fry*
- *shrimp stir-fy*

NOTE

We are not encouraging you to intentionally insert misspellings into your page content. That will affect your credibility with readers and will likely get picked up by one of Google's content quality algorithms.

A lot of English words are associated with unique colloquialisms or alternative spellings across different dialects, such as *plow* and *plough*, *check* and *cheque*, *donut* and *doughnut*, and *hiccup* and *hiccough*. In this case, *prawn* can be another word for *shrimp*; you might try substituting *prawn* and *prawns* for *shrimp* in those keywords. Don't be afraid to consult a thesaurus!

When you've broken down a high-difficulty keyword into more efficient and affordable variations, be sure to evaluate them for relevance before adding them to your spreadsheet. Don't delete the original keyword—you'll want to keep track of that in the future, and it provides an excellent reference point for calculating opportunities for other keywords.

Trending and Seasonality

The keyword plan that you've been building has been focused on present-day opportunities with current data. If you happen to be doing keyword research on Black Friday or during a major industry convention where a lot of product releases and keynote speeches are generating buzz, then your data will probably be affected. That's

why monthly keyword reviews are important (that's covered in more depth later in this chapter), and it's also why you should create separate keyword plans for seasonal search marketing. At the very least you should create a new column for seasonality, or a new worksheet that enables better sorting and filtering for multiple seasons without cluttering up your main *Keyword Plan* spreadsheet.

Many keyword research tools offer a fine-grained, long-term view of seasonal variance in topics and keywords, but the best overall big-picture tool for analyzing trends and seasonality is Google Trends. That's going to give you access to the largest amount of seasonal search data, and you can easily compare several related keywords to see if there are better opportunities in and out of season. Even a tiny difference like changing a singular word to plural can yield different seasonal variance.

Literally any keyword can be seasonally affected, and not always during the times of year that you may expect. It's likely that there are regular and predictable trends that you aren't aware of because they don't align with a traditional event or holiday, but that could still be valuable to your site. For instance, sales of memory cards for digital cameras could spike slightly in March due to a combination of unrelated overlapping factors such as college basketball playoffs, Vancouver Fashion Week, and a yearly increase in cruise ship voyages. If your site sells memory cards, you might not even be aware of the impact of these trends because your competitors are optimized for them, or because you've always seen a steady increase in sales from March to August, and you assumed it was due to the usual peak wedding and vacation seasons (which are probably much more expensive to target). It's worthwhile to challenge your assumptions and investigate any potential trends that you find. Try to break them down to account for every major contributing factor.

Sometimes there are so many trends and seasons that impact your business that it makes sense to step back and focus on the big picture first. For instance, a costume shop is busy year-round supplying local and traveling actors, theater production companies, makeup artists, models, musicians, clowns, and a wide variety of private parties and special events. Halloween might be a busier time of year than normal, but it might also be prohibitively expensive to optimize for the Halloween season due to broader competition and low conversion rate. If you specialize in expensive high-quality costumes and professional stage makeup, then it might not be worth the effort to compete against low-margin, high-volume retail juggernauts like Walmart and Amazon for sales of cheap Halloween costumes. School semesters might also be "seasons" because of school plays, ballets, and operas. The common theme here is that most of the costume shop's business is local, so even though the national Halloween season might seem like an obvious choice for seasonal optimization, it's likely that focusing on smaller local trends and non-Halloween customers will be a more efficient and profitable effort.

Seasonal optimization is a year-round process, and thus so is seasonal keyword research. If you want to target the Halloween season (from August to October), you can't expect to start the process in July—or if you do, don't expect to get very far with it this year. Search traffic tends to start going up two or three months in advance of major holidays and events, but Halloween costumes and Christmas gifts both draw heavily from pop culture fads, trends, movies, TV shows, and news events from the previous year, so there's no such thing as "too early" to start collecting keywords for the next holiday season.

Current Rank Data

To get where you want to go, first you have to know where you are. The SEO platforms we've recommended in Chapter 4 are capable of analyzing your site and providing the current SERP rankings for every page, as well as the exact URL that's being indexed at that rank. If multiple URLs are ranked for a given keyword, then use the highest-ranked one for now. (You'll decide what to do with the lower-ranked pages in future chapters.)

To calculate an opportunity score (which is covered in the next section), you'll need to have a number in every cell in the *Current rank* column. If there are highly relevant high-priority keywords that you want to place for but currently don't, then fill in the blank with *101*. A SERP rank of 101 is more or less equivalent to not ranking at all, and it will be above the "top 100 ranked pages" threshold that most data providers use as a standard report, so if you improve your rankings for these keywords in the future, you'll be able to see your progress.

It's possible to continue the keyword valuation process without current rank data (and if you're launching a new site, you'll have to), but that makes the cost (and therefore, opportunity) calculations less accurate.

Finding the Best Opportunities

At this point you have enough data to identify good opportunities for optimization. Use your spreadsheet's filtering, sorting, and pivot table functions to narrow the scope of your keyword plan so that it only shows the keywords that you want to work with. Particularly with pivot tables, it's best to create a new worksheet named *Opportunities* for this purpose.

That's all you need to do for now. If you want to go further, there are some extra valuation considerations in the following subsections.

Calculating an opportunity score

It's possible to create a new column to calculate an *opportunity score*. Unfortunately, it's difficult to provide specific guidance on how to calculate this because we don't

know exactly what data you have, what your goals are, or which factors are most important to you, so we don't know exactly what a "good opportunity" means to you. Throughout this chapter we've used mostly retail examples because they're common and easy to use for that purpose. However, many organizations aren't doing retail at all. Some are focused on branding, while others may be collecting qualified leads for sales calls, acquiring email list subscribers, or making money by selling advertising. If you have a good idea of how much an average conversion is worth to you, though, then you can calculate a generic opportunity score by performing the traditional cost/benefit analysis:

opportunity score =

(# of potential conversions × conversion value) / cost of optimization

If this is an initial or early-stage keyword plan, then you won't yet have a good method for calculating the cost of optimization. Some people use CPC as a cost metric here, and that's better than nothing, but it won't be very accurate. While organic search costs and paid search costs will scale similarly with keyword difficulty, you cannot reliably calculate one based on the other. However, you do know what your current rank for a keyword is (or you used 101 as a placeholder value for unranked pages) and how difficult it will be to compete for a higher rank, so here's how you might reframe "cost" and "benefit" in terms of effort and traffic:

opportunity score =

((relevance × priority) × search volume) / (difficulty × current rank)

NOTE

If you don't have any difficulty scores (and you don't want to calculate them), you can substitute any of the difficulty factors except for search volume (CPC, backlink count, total number of results), though this will reduce the confidence interval.

This formula won't work as written because the data isn't normalized (the metrics are not on the same scale), and the various factors are not weighted according to importance. You can normalize the data with a spreadsheet formula (don't overwrite your *Keyword Plan* columns, though; use the *Opportunities* worksheet instead). Weighting of the metrics is entirely subjective. We suggest experimenting with different weighting to align with your budget and implementation timeline.

TIP

If you feel overwhelmed right now, ask an accountant or business analyst for help.

SERP space considerations

By default, Google has provided 10 organic search results per page (though users can modify their search settings to display longer SERPs), but that's not a rule or a guarantee. Organic search results can occupy a varying percentage of SERP real estate due to encroachment by Google Ads and SERP special features, such as:

Knowledge panels
> This is a variable-sized area on the right side of the SERP that pulls relevant content from the Google Knowledge Graph. Often an informational query is satisfied by a knowledge panel, which means there's no click-through to a result.

OneBox results
> These are trusted answers to search queries. They're shown in a box above the organic results and are usually short text excerpts. Some examples (among many) of queries that generate OneBox results are word definitions, unit conversions, package tracking, mathematical equations, health issues, and hotel searches.

Featured snippets
> These are similar to OneBox results, except the information comes from a highly ranked and trusted site instead of from the Knowledge Graph. A featured snippet is a much larger text excerpt than a regular snippet, and it appears above the URL instead of below it. You're more likely to see featured snippets for natural language queries and mobile searches.

The map pack
> This is a small excerpt of an image from Google Maps that can appear in the middle of the organic results, along with the top three Google Business Profile listings. A map pack will appear for local (or location-specific) queries such as *sushi restaurants in Orlando*.

The sitelinks search box
> This is a search field that sometimes appears below a snippet. If Google determines that a broad query is likely to lead to a second query on a site that has its own integrated search engine, then Google will try to preempt that second search by providing a search field with a site-limited scope. This often happens when someone uses a URL or a well-known brand or site name as a search query. For instance, if a user searches Google for *pinterest*, Google will provide a sitelinks search box under the top result for *pinterest.com*.

Rich results
> In lieu of a snippet, some search results can display an image thumbnail or review star rating. This is typically for results where the rich element is an important part of the content, such as pages that contain reviews of books or movies, or interviews with celebrities.

The carousel

> If there are multiple pages on a site that are similar and contain rich results, Google may choose to display them in a horizontal carousel.

Enriched results

> When search results for job postings, recipes, or event listings lead to pages that contain interactive elements, Google may add some of that functionality to a rich result.

The more ads and SERP features there are for a keyword, the shorter the list of organic results on the first page, and the less opportunity you have for a click-through to your site. You don't want to spend time and money improving your rank on a SERP that has a low organic CTR. Special features and ads can reduce the number of page 1 organic results and siphon off much of the traffic from the remaining results. Note that you do also have the potential for optimizing your content to show up in the search features, and if that is a fit for your organization to pursue then this could still potentially be worthwhile.

Special features also occasionally create bizarre scenarios in which you will get less traffic by ranking higher. If Google is excerpting your content with a special feature, searchers may not need to click through to your page unless they need additional information. By deoptimizing that page so that it ranks slightly lower, you can force Google to excerpt someone else's content, which allows your page to return to the normal SERP list (and hopefully stay on page 1). However, it may not be wise to deoptimize in these cases, depending on how the changes in traffic impact your actual conversions. In many cases that lowered level of search traffic delivers much more highly qualified traffic, so make your decisions here with care.

This encroachment can apply to any keyword in your list, but it's especially impactful on natural language questions and local keywords. Keep in mind, though, that it's only a major issue for pages in the top 10 results. You can easily check SERPs for special features by querying Google with your keywords, but most of the good keyword research tools have scoring systems that measure organic CTR and/or SERP feature encroachment.

Rank threshold values

When calculating the costs and benefits of optimization, it helps to adopt a broad hierarchical view of search rankings. The actual rank numbers don't matter very much when they're within certain ranges. Ranks lower (meaning a larger number) than 20 are only meaningful from the perspective of monitoring the impact of your SEO efforts and your potential to rank on those terms over time.

Above all else, rankings aren't worth spending time on until the fundamentals are solid. If your site recently launched, or if it has technical or UI problems that prevent a

lot of your pages from being indexed, then you don't have any data to work with yet, and the first goal is to get everything into the index at any rank. Likewise, if you're repairing a site that is being penalized for spam or black hat SEO tactics, then the first goal is to clean it up and get back into the index. Keyword research is still important, but don't worry about rankings yet.

From unranked, the next threshold is the top 100. From a conversion standpoint the low end of this threshold is meaningless, because the ninth page of search results is the SERP equivalent of Siberia; it may be on the map, but no one goes there except by accident or adventure. The tenth page of results is the doorway to the twilight zone; results beyond that are not truly ranked, and Google will only provide an estimate as to how many there are unless you navigate to the last results page (whatever it may be). Regardless of traffic or conversion rate, from an analytics standpoint it's worth the effort to get into the top 100 because most SEO platforms only provide data for the top 100 sites for each keyword, so you'll have access to useful metrics and can start tracking your progress.

To get minimal value out of a keyword, you have to place within the top 20 results. Only 5% of organic clicks go to results beyond the first page, so if that's where you are, there's a faint hope of a click-through, but unless the search volume is very high it may not be measurable or predictable. So, if you're in the low twenties for ranking you still have a lot of work to do, but if you've steadily improved your rankings to get there, then you can start to get an idea of what kind of effort it will take to break into the top 10. Depending on the keyword's difficulty level, you might already be in striking distance of the first page. Your SEO tools will help you to dial all that in, with the help of their cost predictions, backlink suggestions, content ideas, and comprehensive competitive analyses.

About 95% of organic SERP clicks are on the first page, and a large percentage of those go to the top result. The further you are from #1, the fewer clicks you get, and remember: SERP features can kick you off the first page even if you're in the top 10, so if you want a high-priority keyword to be on the first page, you need to know what the threshold is for it. It would be disappointing to spend a lot of resources to get to #10, only to find out that a rich result kicks you back to page 2.

Take these thresholds into account when you're considering keyword valuation and planning. If you're currently placing #90 for a high-difficulty, high-volume, high-priority, high-relevance keyword, it probably isn't worth investing that much to improve your ranking until you start to approach #20.

Filtering by topic

Instead of looking for the best opportunities among the entire keyword list, you might consider filtering them by topic instead, especially for a long-tail strategy where opportunity is measured in aggregate.

If the list is only a few thousand rows or less, you could sort your *Keyword Plan* list by each individual topic to get a quick impression of which topics represent the best opportunities, but it would be more efficient (and becomes a necessity when working with larger lists) to create a new worksheet that aggregates the number of keywords in each topic or superset, and their overall search volume.

Acting on Your Keyword Plan

Now that you have your keyword plan, the next step is to leverage it to drive traffic growth for your site. Some of the key activities include:

Improving pages in striking distance
> These are the places where you can find quick wins. Sometimes simple optimizations to title tags and/or content are enough to move you significantly up in the rankings for one or more keywords. These are the kinds of fast results that your (or your client's) executive team will love.

> ─── **NOTE** ───────────────
>
> We consider a page to be within striking distance when it currently ranks in the top 20 search results for a query, but not in position 1. Optimizing pages that are in striking distance is often the fastest way to increase traffic (and revenue) from your SEO efforts.

Optimizing title tags
> Follow up on your keyword research and identify pages with suboptimal title tags, then take the time to improve them.

Optimizing meta descriptions
> These do not impact search rankings, but as they are often shown in the search results as the descriptions for your pages they can increase CTR. For that reason, you should use keywords to improve the relevance of your meta descriptions to users. Focus on providing search engine users with an understanding of the value proposition of your site.

Improving site contextual interlinking
> As mentioned in Chapter 5, users (both B2B and B2C) spend more than 75% of their time on websites either browsing or searching. Global site navigation and search boxes are a part of how to help users find what they're looking for, but

contextual interlinking also plays a big role. This is why in-context links are so important. Your keyword research data will help you figure out the key topic areas and the phrases where you need to do this.

Building out your editorial calendar
Identify the keywords that your current site content has enough depth to compete on. Then build out a map of new pages to create to fill the gaps. Prioritize this plan by aligning it with the key strategic objectives of your organization (e.g., what lines of business are the key area of focus?).

These are a few of the areas where leveraging your keyword research is critical. Don't let that highly valuable data just sit in some soon-to-be-forgotten folder somewhere on your PC!

Periodic Keyword Reviews

After you've developed a good keyword plan, you should schedule regular reviews to update the data and adjust your calculations. We suggest monthly reviews, since that's the interval that most search data providers use for updating keyword information.

You should also do a keyword review if there are any significant content additions to your site, changes in business policies or practices, or shifts in trends or standards. If the marketing plan changes, or if the CEO declares that they're going to "bet the company" on this new product release, or when old products are retired, or when a competitor announces a new product, do a keyword review.

Even a news story that barely relates to your products or content can impact the search volume of your keywords, such as the announcement of a new version of Microsoft Windows, political unrest in Taiwan, or a shipping container shortage. Anything that affects what people search for will affect keywords.

Sometimes a change can sneak up on you. Computer monitors, for instance, have switched connection standards a few times over the years, from VGA to DVI, then to HDMI, and more recently to DisplayPort. During each transition, people steadily search for converters that enable the outgoing standard to work with the incoming one. Let's say your site sells cables for electronics, and you have a page optimized for *hdmi to displayport adapter* that has been performing well ever since DisplayPort was introduced to the market. Your previous keyword plans have repeatedly identified this as a measurably better opportunity than *displayport to hdmi adapter*, but there will be a certain point in the transition between these standards when a fresh keyword review will show that *displayport to hdmi adapter* offers a much better opportunity because all new devices now have a DisplayPort connector, but everyone still has a bunch of old HDMI cables that they'd like to reuse. The sooner you know about that inflection point, the quicker you can respond to it with new optimization.

Resist the urge to say: "But I tested that, and I found the best query to optimize this page for." Optimization is an ongoing process, not an event. A simple change in the word order of a query can have a significant impact on traffic at any time, even if the context is the same. Though there may be a lot of overlap in the results between *hdmi to displayport adapter* and *displayport to hdmi adapter*, and even if they refer to the exact same product, they still lead to two distinct SERPs. Even if your page is ranked at the same position in both SERPs, special features such as People Also Ask boxes will favor the result that most closely matches the exact word order of the query, regardless of its rank (within reason).

SEO platforms like the ones we've recommended in Chapter 4 will usually help you keep track of your progress over time, but you might find some value in analyzing the numbers on your own. We suggest creating a new *Keyword Plan* spreadsheet (by copying the old one, or starting from scratch) every time you do a keyword review. That way you can go back to previous plans and get a page-specific view of how a particular keyword's performance has changed.

Conclusion

Keyword research is a complex and time-consuming aspect of search engine optimization, but the rewards are high. Once you learn where the keyword search volume is, you can begin to think about how that affects the information architecture and navigational structure of your site—two critical elements that we will explore in greater detail in Chapter 7. You'll also understand where your content gaps are, and how to alter your metadata to improve search traffic and increase conversions. Everything from title tags to page copy, internal links, content calendars, and link-building campaigns will rely on a well-researched keyword plan.

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Eric Enge is the president of Pilot Holding. He was formerly founder and CEO of Stone Temple Consulting, a leading SEO firm that served a wide variety of companies, including many of the world's largest brands. Perficient (NASDAQ:PRFT) acquired Stone Temple in July 2018. Eric stayed at Perficient for three years to assist in the integration of Stone Temple into Perficient. Eric is also a highly regarded speaker, and regularly speaks on internet marketing topics at conferences such as Search Marketing Expo, Pubcon, State of Search, Engage, and many more. He has also been named Search Marketer of the Year by the Search Engine Land Awards and Search Personality of the Year by the US Search Awards, and the Drum Search Awards.

Eric has been a leading voice on the role of AI in SEO since 2013, including in-depth analyses of how Google has been applying AI in search. More recently he has been writing and speaking on Generative AI: its capabilities, its future, and how you can use it as an integral part of your digital marketing programs.

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Colophon

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