

# SEO WORKBOOK

# 2023



JASON MCDONALD

**SEO WORKBOOK:  
SEARCH ENGINE  
OPTIMIZATION SUCCESS IN  
SEVEN STEPS**

2023 EDITION

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“The perfect is the enemy of the good.”

~ Voltaire



# I

## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the *SEO Workbook, 2023 Edition*! My name is Jason McDonald, and I will be your guide to the mysterious world of “SEO,” or “Search Engine Optimization.” SEO is the art and science of getting a company, product, or service to the top of Google. SEO is your gateway to “free advertising” on search engines. SEO means more inquiries, more customers, and more sales. SEO is powerful. SEO is mysterious. SEO seems impossible, and yet – I firmly believe – even “mere mortals” like you can master SEO.

Fully updated for 2023, the *SEO Workbook* teaches you how to play the game of search engine optimization and how to win. It shares the tips, tricks, secrets, and “best practices” that will help you climb the mountain of Google, look down at your competition, and exclaim, “I did it!” You *can* reach the right customer, at the right moment, in the right way. You *can* do SEO. You *can* master this seemingly complex spaghetti minefield of technical terminology too terrifying to take seriously.

I will show you how.

### SEO = FREE ADVERTISING

Free advertising on Google? Yippie! On Bing? Double Yippie! On Amazon? Triple Yippie! But here’s the rub: **SEO seems really complicated.**

Is it “too good to be true?”

I understand your frustration with SEO. It's an industry full of frauds, scoundrels, and dishonest robbers – people who think that they know, people who actually do know, and people whose primary business is “hustling” unsuspecting business owners and marketing managers. I know the complaints, and I hear them often from students in my classes on SEO taught via Stanford Continuing Studies (<http://jmlinks.com/34y>) and during the many corporate workshops, I do around the country.

Here are some **common ones**:

- We need to get our company to the top of Google; our competitors are there, but we're not!
- We redesigned our website, and it looks fabulous. However, we hardly show on Google at all, even for our own company name!
- We hired an SEO company, spent several thousands of dollars, and achieved nothing. So-called “SEO experts” are just thieves!
- I don't understand computers, can't write HTML, and I can't do SEO. Game over!
- I pay attention to Google, and SEO seems to change constantly. There's no way we can keep up with Penguin, Panda, Semantic Search, and Mobile-Friendly Website Design. *You've got to be kidding!*
- *Here's a new one for 2023.* Google has moved towards “artificial intelligence,” so it doesn't matter anymore whether you know SEO. Google will just “figure out” what your website means. (*#NOTTrue*)
- Google? It's not just Google anymore. It's Amazon. It's the App Store. It's Yelp. It's Airbnb. The complexity is killing us!
- SEO is just too hard for anyone without a degree in Computer to be able to do. We give up! (*They then start uncontrollably sobbing*).
- We'll just do Google Ads (and spend thousands of dollars). *Google clearly needs more money from struggling small businesses just like ours, so they can invest in self-driving cars and gourmet meals for their pampered employees!*
- *SEO is dead.* It's all social media now. It's all about Facebook, Twitter, Yelp, TikTok, and Instagram. SEO is so “old school” that we should only do social media. Millennials don't use Google! (*Then they immediately search Google to find the closest pizza restaurant or best supplier of organic widgets for their business*).

I hear and feel your pain. I am just a regular guy, and I have been confronted with what I call **techtimidation** probably as much as you have.

## **TECHTIMIDATION = THE USE OF JARGON BY TECHIES TO INTIMIDATE MERE MORTALS**

However, I firmly believe that a little education, a lot of hard work, and some common sense are all you really need to succeed in SEO. The computer nerds (and Googlers) would like us all to believe SEO is difficult – no, impossible – without a computer science degree.

*Poppycock. Hokum. Hooy. Malarkey, Rubbish, Baloney, and even B.S.!*

**You can do SEO. You can succeed at it. It is easier than you think.**

The purpose of this book is to, **first**, make you believe in yourself, **second**, empower you with the basic knowledge of how the SEO game is played, and **third**, help you make a detailed SEO plan for your business.

*More on this later.*

Let's return to SEO, *the art and science of getting your product, service, or company to the top of Google.*

### **Google Algorithm Updates**

Recent years have seen some terrifying Google search engine algorithm updates, such as *Penguin, Panda, Hummingbird, and Pigeon*. (*Google algorithm updates are named after animals just to be even more intimidating*). There's even been a so-called "Medical Update" and a

public release of *Google Search Quality Raters General Guidelines* that talk about acronyms such as E-A-T (Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness) and YMYL (Your Money or Your Life). Google is aggressively moving into AI (Artificial Intelligence), on the theory that the search engine can predict what people want and which websites are best for a given keyword search, even if they do not follow the rules of SEO.

Yikes! It's enough to make your head spin. Backward. So hard that you become an Internet meme.

Among the most important, *Penguin* has been an algorithm attack against “low quality” links, and *Panda* has been an algorithm attack against poor quality content. In addition, Google now penalizes sites that are not “mobile-friendly” and has made major changes to local search results (*Pigeon*). The local “snack pack” box on local searches like “pizza” or “plumber,” for example, has been reduced to three listings, or in some cases, just two results, wreaking havoc on local small businesses that depend on Google for customer inquiries. In some markets, such as that for plumbers, lawyers, or massage therapists, the Local Pack is crowded with ever-more-annoying ads, and on the mobile phone, Google has done a good (*SIC!*) job of crowding out organic results with ads at the top and bottom of the page. (Queue my book on *Google Ads* if you'd like to learn how to play *that* game).

Google's other moves towards so-called “semantic search” have been efforts to embed “artificial intelligence” into its search algorithm. Everything seems to be “going mobile,” going “voice,” and getting frightfully complex for your average small business owner or marketer. Is Artificial Intelligence a game-changer? Is Genisys Skynet? Will Arnold Schwarzenegger visit the Googleplex as the Terminator?

Google, in short, has been busy changing the rules of the SEO game. *Or has it?*

Here's an important tip: don't believe everything you read on the blogosphere, and don't believe every official statement by Google on SEO. There's a lot of disinformation and misinformation out there, and often changes apply to some industries but not to others.

Have you heard of “fake news?” Well, there's a lot of it in SEO, and one of the whoppers is that “SEO is constantly changing,” and implicit to that is the advice to “Just give up – write content for humans and spend money on Google Ads.”

I beg to differ. I beg to explain, and I beg you not to panic. Yes, there have been changes, and yes, Google is “going mobile” and moving to “voice search” and “Artificial Intelligence.” But here’s the good news: the **basics** haven’t really changed, and if you stick to the **basics** according to “white hat” SEO – you’ll be fine.

Let me repeat that:

***the basics have not changed in SEO.***

This workbook will explain what not to do and what to do to succeed at SEO in this post-*Penguin*, post-*Panda* world, RankBrain, AI, BERT, New World Order. And it will also educate you on the unchanged basic rules of SEO success. It also offers a few new insights on AI and review-based marketing (more on this later).

(If you don’t know what *Panda*, *Penguin*, and *RankBrain* are... don’t worry – I’ll explain in subsequent chapters).

Back to SEO.

**What is SEO?** SEO, of course, is the art and science of getting your company, product, or service to the top of Google’s organic (free) results. If you’re a seller of “industrial fans,” it means that when customers search Google for “industrial fans,” they will see your company’s product at the top of the search results. If you’re a local business like a pizza restaurant or a probate attorney, it means showing at the top of Google for searches such as “pizza delivery” or “probate lawyers in Houston.”

**Why is SEO so valuable?** Simply put, SEO is valuable because nearly everyone turns first to Google to find products, services, or companies and because SEO costs nothing (other than knowledge, blood, sweat, and tears). SEO, in short, is **free** advertising on Google! And there ain’t nothing better than free, is there? (*Well, a few things, but please keep your mind on the task at hand*).

## How Search Works

Let's step back and ponder how the search process works on Google and other search engines. Customers turn to Google first to find new products and services, new companies, and consultants. They tend to ignore ads, and they tend to read and click through the organic listings that show on page one of Google, especially the top three positions. Looking at it from the perspective of a small business, Google is the beginning of a chain of very valuable marketing events.

Ranking on Google for *free* means you are getting *free* advertising,  
*free* advertising means *free* clicks from Google,  
*free* clicks from Google mean *free* web traffic, and  
*free* web traffic means more sales inquiries and, ultimately, more sales.

SEO essentially turns “free advertising” into “paid sales,” which, if you think about it for a moment, is an incredible return on investment!

*(Note that for most of the book, I will refer to Google rather than search engines in general, or Google, Bing, and Yahoo specifically. (By the way, Bing powers Yahoo's search results, meaning there are really just two search engines in the USA, Canada, and Western Europe: Google and Bing). The good news is that the SEO methods to rank on Google will generally work just as well for Bing and Yahoo, and with some variations, SEO also applies to Amazon, eBay, Yelp, and other niche search engines).*

## An SEO Checkup

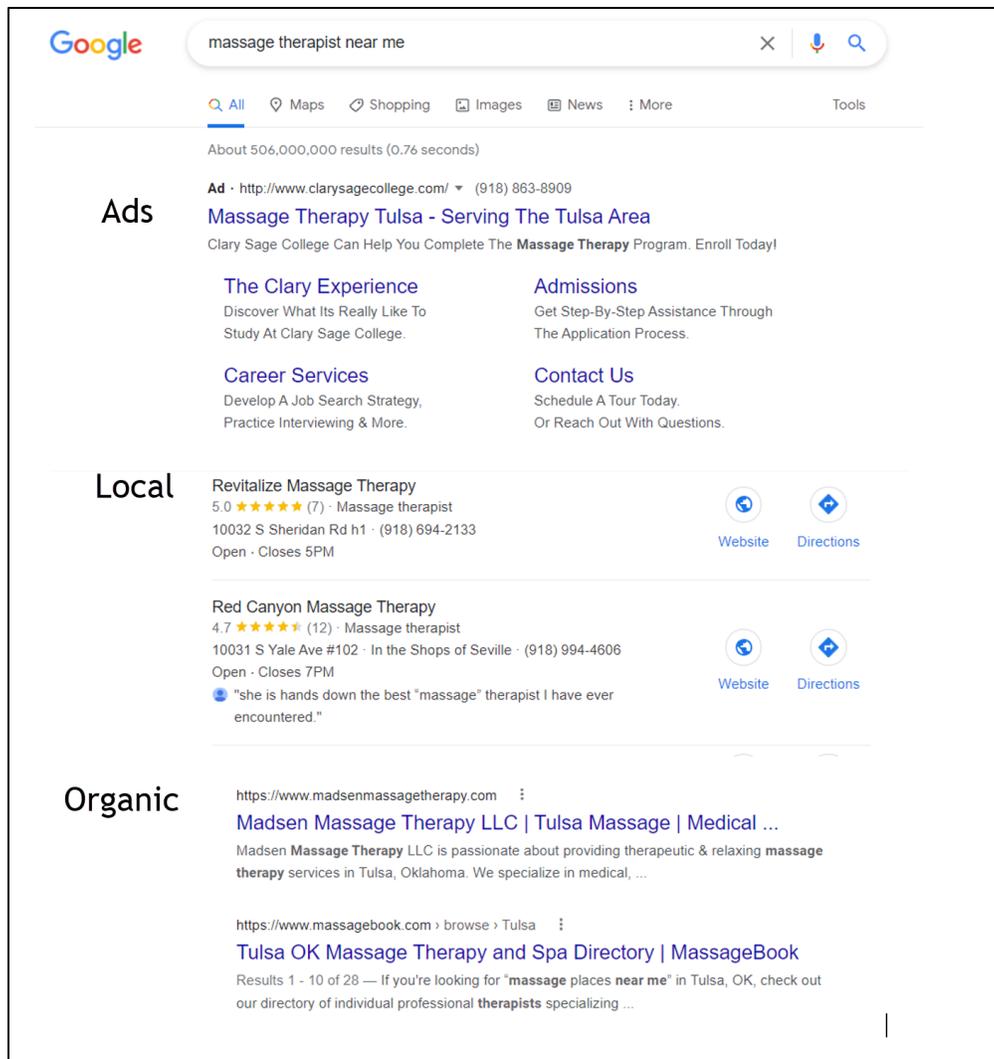
Some questions for you:

1. Do your potential customers use Google to find companies, products, or services like yours?
2. Taking a common search query relevant to your company (e.g., “industrial fans” or “best pizza in San Jose”), do you see your company on Page 1 of Google,

positions 1, 2, or 3? High on the page or low on the page? Do you see yourself in the “local” results which occur for “local” searches such as personal injury attorney, CPA, or sushi?

3. Taking many relevant keyword search queries to your business (*the “universe” of search terms by which customers might search for your company, product, or service*), do you generally show up on Page 1 of Google, positions 1-3? Positions 1-10?, or not at all?

Here’s a screenshot for the search query, “massage therapist near me,” showing the ads (at the top), the local pack (in the middle, usually showing Google review stars), and organic just below that:



Try your own queries, that is, keyword searches that your customers are likely to type into Google. Look at the results: ads (top and bottom of the page), local pack (if relevant, in the middle), and organic (usually just below ads and/or the local pack).

Ignoring the paid ads, if you *generally* appear on Page 1 of Google, and especially in the top positions 1, 2, or 3, for *all* your relevant keywords, you can stop reading this book. You pass with an A+. If you generally do not appear, then keep reading. Or if you appear only on some search queries, but not others, or if you're not sure what your search queries are, then you need help.

If you have no idea what search “queries,” “positions” on Google, or “high” vs. “low” on the page mean, don’t worry. Don’t feel stupid. You need help, and I am going to teach you.

### **Isn’t SEO Hard?**

Well, that’s what Google would like you to think (*so spend money on Google Ads ...*) And that’s what many in the SEO industry would like you to think (*so pay us big consulting fees, and don’t ask any questions!*)

*I don’t agree. SEO isn’t easy, but it isn’t exactly hard, either.*

I’ve taught thousands of people in my online classes, in classes at Stanford Continuing Studies and throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, and in corporate workshops, and I can confirm that there is a lot of confusion about SEO. People think it’s hard, or impossible, or mysterious, and that’s simply not correct.

## **SEO IS EASY; LIKE GETTING FIT IS EASY.**

In explaining SEO, I like to use **analogies**. So, here’s a good one: **SEO is like physical fitness**. Although everyone can conceivably run a marathon, for example, few people make the effort to learn how and even fewer take the disciplined steps necessary to train for and ultimately finish a marathon.

*Does that make running a marathon easy?*

*No.*

*But does that make running a marathon hard?*

*Not really.*

Like running a marathon, SEO is **conceptually** simple (*exercise a lot, train with discipline, don't give up, finish in first place*) but **practically** hard (*you have to work at it nearly every day*).

And, of course, the Olympic champions don't just work *hard*; they work *smart*.

That's the beginning of the **good news**. If you just learn how to work smarter (not harder), you'll find that SEO isn't really that hard. And it gets better.

For one thing, you probably aren't really aiming to run an SEO marathon. You're probably aiming just to "get in shape," meaning to get to the top of relevant keywords that narrowly fit your industry and/or your geographic area. Your more modest goal of helping your business to get free advertising on Google via SEO means only basic knowledge is required and only modest effort.

Indeed, once a small business website is in decent SEO-friendly shape, my guess is about **five hours a week** on "Internet marketing" will suffice to keep you at the top of Google. Results vary, of course, as every situation is unique. But SEO is much, much easier than you'd think.

### **You're Smarter than Your Competitors!**

Even better, in most industries, you'll find that your competitors are not that smart. Most industries are not as competitive in SEO as you would think, and metaphorically speaking, you don't have to run faster than the bear; you just have to run faster than your buddy.

*Let me rephrase that. You are not competing against Google. You are competing against your competitors, and they aren't that much smarter than you. In fact, I bet they might even be dumber.*

Indeed, I'd wager that 90% or more of your competitors are doing little to nothing in terms of SEO. If you just make a modest effort, and if that effort is channeled with the effective knowledge I will teach you in this book, I'll wager that there's a very strong possibility that you'll be on page one of Google if not in the very top positions.

## **The Seven Steps to SEO Success**

This workbook guides you through the **seven steps** to successful SEO. Along the way, we'll set goals, understand technical details, and have fun. Along the way, I will be your "SEO coach" to explain how it all works and to motivate you to keep trying.

### **You can do this!**

Throughout this workbook, I will share with you other examples of businesses that understand SEO and succeed using the **seven steps**.

The **seven steps to SEO success** are built on a philosophy of empowerment. Can you understand SEO? *Yes, you can!* Can you implement SEO? *Yes, you can!* It takes some knowledge, it takes some effort, but yes, you can do it.

Get motivated! Imagine me as your personal SEO coach, dressed in hot pants and with a hot pink megaphone exclaiming, "Work harder! Work smarter! You Can Do This!" while you sweat to the oldies on the treadmill with just a few "miles" to go...

OK, stop imagining me in hot pants with a hot pink megaphone. It's getting weird. But the point is that with a little knowledge, a lot of hard work, and a "never give up" attitude, you can succeed at SEO. You can get your company, product, or service to page 1 of Google. *Certain restrictions and limitations apply; see store for details.* (We'll discuss many technical issues going forward, but yes, you really can do SEO).

Before we dive in, allow me to share just a few more points of background.

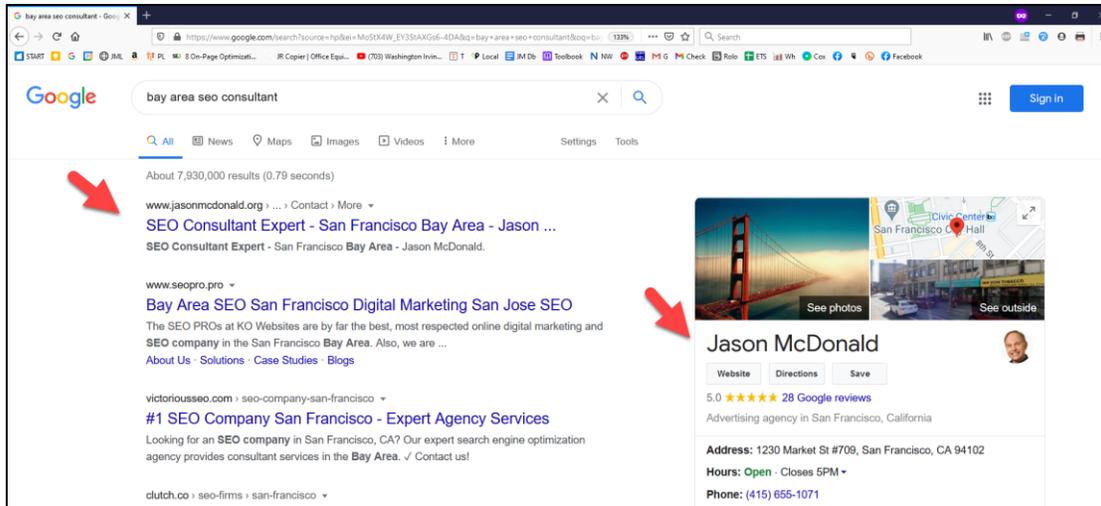
## » MEET THE AUTHOR

Well, first of all, who am I, and what makes me an expert? My name is Jason McDonald, and I have been active on the Internet since 1994 (*having invented the Internet along with Al Gore*). OK, that's a joke, but I have been teaching SEO, AdWords, and Social Media since 2009 - online, in San Francisco, at Stanford University Continuing Studies, at workshops, and in corporate trainings. I love figuring out how things work, and I love teaching others! SEO is an endeavor that I understand, and I want to empower you to understand it as well.

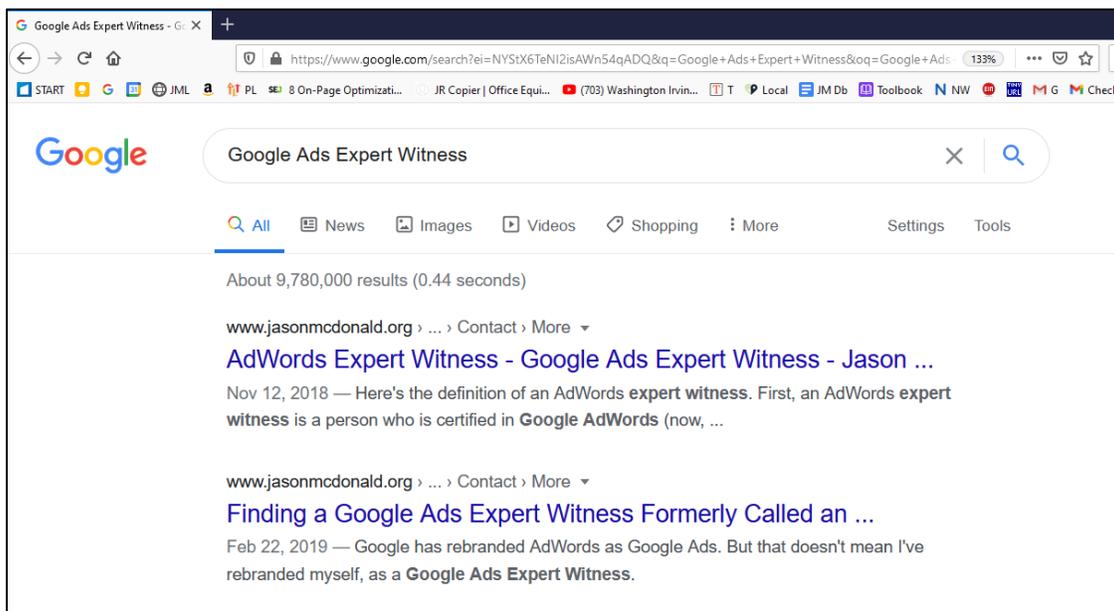
Learn more about me at <https://www.jasonmcdonald.org/>, at my corporate website <https://www.jm-seo.org/>, or be brave and email me a question or comment to [j.mcdonald@jm-seo.net](mailto:j.mcdonald@jm-seo.net). Just Google "Jason McDonald SEO," and you'll find me there at the top, beating out several much better-looking guys who have six-pack abs and careers in sports, as well as a New Age Guru who does spiritual training in Australia. *#RevengeOfTheNerds*

Don't believe I'm good at SEO, Google "SEO Expert San Francisco" (*you'll see me there*), Google "Google Ads Expert Witness" or "SEO Expert Witness" (*Yes, I do legal work – there's good money in it, and I have kids to support*), or Google "Twaggle" (*It's a word I created for my Marketing Book*). Try going to Amazon and entering "SEO" or "Social Media Marketing." You'll find my books. Amazon is a search engine, and yes, I do Amazon SEO as well. Calm yourself and Jeff Bezos down.

Here's a screenshot of *Bay Area SEO Consultant*:



And here's one for Google Ads Expert Witness:



I rank at or near the top for San Francisco and Bay Area searches for “SEO expert,” “SEO consultant,” and “SEO agency;” for expert witness searches for my legal work in SEO, Google Ads, and Social Media Marketing; and for niche searches such as

“Search Engine Optimization consultants in the Bay Area.” I rank on Amazon at or near the top for all my books.

Uncle? Give up? Still don't believe me? Call me up or email me before you buy this book, and I'll give you reference examples of my SEO clients (*who don't want their competitors to know about me*).

## » WHY THIS BOOK IS DIFFERENT

There are quite a few books on SEO out there! There are zillions of blog posts! There are thousands of SEO consultants! There are hundreds of crazy harebrained schemes...

But there is only one **workbook**: the *SEO Workbook*.

How is a *workbook* different from a *book*? Here's how.

First of all, this workbook speaks in **practical, no-nonsense English**. Whereas most of the SEO books out there are *by experts for experts*, this workbook explains SEO in plain English and does not get lost in the details. Most businesspeople don't need to know every gory detail about SEO; rather, they need practical, hands-on advice about what to do first, second, third, and so forth. The *SEO Workbook* is as much about “doing SEO” as it is about “understanding SEO.”

Secondly, the *SEO Workbook* is **hands-on**. Most SEO books are meant to be passively read. *SEO Workbook*, by contrast, gives you “hands-on” worksheets and deliverables. In fact, each Chapter ends with a **DELIVERABLE** marked in **bold**. Each Chapter also has **TO-DOS** (marked in **bold**) because a workbook is not just about reading; it's about **doing** and **succeeding**. Each Chapter has a list of “action items” and a quiz to test your knowledge.

Third, while most books are outdated on the day they are published, the *SEO Workbook* connects to up-to-date **Internet resources** such as free SEO tools via the companion *Marketing Almanac* and hands-on YouTube videos that show you how to succeed. After all, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a “how to” book should be more than a book, shouldn't it? It should be a gateway to up-to-date knowledge.

Fourth, I encourage you to reach out to me with your **questions**. Simply email [jason.mcdonald@jm-seo.net](mailto:jason.mcdonald@jm-seo.net) or visit <http://jmlinks.com/contact>. I truly enjoy

teaching SEO, and I truly encourage my readers to ask questions. In fact, I learn as much from my students as they do from me because if the question is something weird and puzzling, we'll learn the answer together. Don't be shy! Obviously, I can't give you hours of expensive consulting time for free, but – within reason – I answer each and every short question that comes in.

## » WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

I have written *SEO Workbook* for the following groups of practical business folk:

**Small Business Owners.** If you own a small business that gets (or could get) significant customer traffic from the Web, this book is for you.

**Small Business Marketers.** If you are in charge of marketing for a small business that gets (or could get) significant customer traffic from the Web, this book is for you.

**Marketing Managers.** If you lead a Web team of inside or outside bloggers, SEO content writers, or other Internet marketing technicians, including external SEO companies, this book is for you.

**Web Designers.** If you design websites but want to design sites that not only look good but actually rank high on Google searches, this book is for you.

**Non-profit Marketers.** If you work at a non-profit or governmental agency that depends on Web search traffic, then this book is also for you.

Anyone whose organization (and its products, services, or other offerings) would benefit from being at the top of Google, for free, can benefit from the *SEO Workbook*.

## » THE SEVEN STEPS TO SEO SUCCESS

Here are the seven steps to SEO Success:

1. **Goals:** Define Your Goals
2. **Keywords:** Identify Keywords
3. **On Page SEO:** Get Your Website to “Speak Google”
4. **Content Marketing:** Create Quality Content for Google and for Humans
5. **Off Page SEO:** Build Links, Leverage Social Media, and Go Local
6. **Metrics:** Measure and Learn from Your Results
7. **Learn:** Never Stop Learning!

And here are the seven steps to SEO success in more detail –

**Step #1: GOALS.** SEO, like physical fitness, is purpose-driven! You can’t achieve your goals if you don’t define what they are.

**1.1 Attitude** – attitude is everything, and SEO requires a commitment to learning how SEO works as well as a desire to implement positive SEO-friendly changes. Goal 1.1 is to have the right attitude.

**1.2 Goals** – define what you sell, who your customers are, and how best to reach them. Define website goals, such as to get online sales or acquire customer names, phone numbers, and email addresses as sales leads.

**Step #2 KEYWORDS – identify your keywords.** Keywords drive nearly every aspect of SEO, so you need a well-structured, clearly defined “keyword worksheet.”

**2.1 Keywords** – identify high-volume, high-value keywords.

**2.2 Keyword Worksheet** – build a keyword worksheet and measure your rank on Google and Bing.

**Step #3 ON PAGE SEO for your website.** Once you know your keywords, where do you put them? It begins with page tags, proceeds through website organization, and

ends with an “SEO audit” that outlines your SEO strategy. The nerd word for this is “On Page” SEO.

**3.1 Page Tags** – understand basic HTML tags and weave your target keywords into strategic tags such as the TITLE, META DESCRIPTION, and IMG ALT tags.

**3.2 Website Structure** – build landing pages, restructure your homepage, and optimize website layout through keyword-heavy link sculpting.

**Step #4 CONTENT MARKETING.** They say that “content is king” in terms of SEO, and they are right. In this section, you’ll create a long-term content strategy that moves beyond the “quick fix” of your site to a day-by-day, week-by-week system of SEO-friendly content.

**4.1 Content SEO** – devise a content strategy, specifically who will do what, when, where, how, and how often – that is, a short and long-term SEO content marketing strategy including an inventory of the content you need to succeed.

**4.2 Blogging** – set up a blog that follows best SEO practices, including all-important connections to social media platforms like Google+ and Twitter.

**4.3 Press Release SEO** - leverage press release syndication services for SEO because press releases are an easy technique to get links and build buzz on social media.

**Step #5 OFF PAGE SEO – links and social media.** “Off Page” SEO leverages external web links and social media to boost your website’s authority on Google. Use the traditional tactic of getting relevant inbound links. Then, leverage social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube to enhance your SEO efforts via “social authority!”

**5.1 Link Building** – conduct a link-building audit and create a long-term link-building strategy.

**5.2 Social Media SEO** – look for social media mention opportunities, and enable relevant social profiles to enhance Google’s trust in your website as an authoritative resource.

**5.3 Local SEO** – local SEO stands at the juncture of SEO, local, and review-based marketing, and so we dive into how to optimize a website for local searches.

**Step #6 METRICS – measure and learn from your results.** Like physical fitness, SEO is a process that starts with a defined set of goals and employs specific measurements of goal achievement.

**6.1 Metrics** - measure your progress towards the top of Google, inbound keywords, and paths taken by customers once they land on your website.

**Step #7 LEARN - never stop learning.** SEO starts with self-discovery, proceeds through technical knowledge, and ends with the hard work of implementation.

**7.1 Learning** – use Chapter 7.1 to get access to companion **worksheets** and the very important *Marketing Almanac* and my *secret dashboard*, which provide hundreds of free SEO tools, tools to help you in all aspects of SEO, from identifying keywords through page tags to links and social mentions.

## » REGISTER YOUR WORKBOOK FOR FREE ONLINE RESOURCES

Please **register** your *Workbook*. You’ll not only get a full-color PDF copy of this *Workbook* to download with active, clickable links to the resources (very handy to read on your computer). You’ll also get my updated *Marketing Almanac*, my secret *SEO Dashboard*, and all the Workbook’s companion worksheets to help you step-by-step. You’ll even get a free pony! (OK, you won’t get a free pony, but you’ll get loads of hands-on materials to help you start “doing” SEO).

To register, follow these easy steps:

1. Go to the **JM Internet Group** Website, click on “Register Your Workbook,” or just go directly to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z>.
2. Reenter your passcode: **seo2023z**
3. If you have any problems, contact me via <http://jmlinks.com/contact> or call 800-298-4065 for help.

Sign up for email alerts at <http://jmlinks.com/free>, and - last but not least- watch a few of my YouTube videos at <https://www.youtube.com/jmgrp>; you’ll find I am as crazy and enthusiastic on video as I am in this book!

### Access Jump Code Links

Note: throughout this book, I use the website <http://jmlinks.com/> to point to resources. You can either click on the resource directly in the book (if you’re reading in digital format). Or, simply go to <http://jmlinks.com/> and enter the **JUMP code**. For example, to visit <http://jmlinks.com/7a>, simply go to <http://jmlinks.com/> and enter “**7a**”. That will take you to the referenced Internet resource.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on how to use the jump codes at <http://jmlinks.com/jump> or visit <http://jmlinks.com/> directly and enter *jump*.

### » SPREAD THE WORD: TAKE A SURVEY & GET \$5!

If you like the book, please take a moment to provide honest feedback. Here’s my special offer for those eager enough to take a short survey –

1. **Visit** <http://jmlinks.com/survey>.
2. **Complete** the survey on the book, as indicated.
3. Include your **email address** and **any feedback** (good, bad, positive, negative) about the book).

4. I will gift you \$5 via Amazon gift eCard.

This offer is subject to change without notice.

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That's a *good thing*. This guide is **independent**. My aim is to “tell it as I see it,” giving you no-nonsense information on how to succeed at SEO.

In addition, please note the following:

- All trademarks are the property of their respective owners. I have no relationship with nor endorsement from the mark holders. Any use of their marks is so I can provide information to you.
- Any reference to or citation of third-party products or services, whether for Google, Yahoo, Bing, or otherwise, should not be construed as an endorsement of those products or services tools, nor as a warranty as to their effectiveness or compliance with the terms of service of Google, Yahoo, or Bing.

The information used in this guide has been reviewed and updated as of publication. However, SEO changes rapidly, so please be aware that scenarios, facts, and conclusions are subject to change without notice.

**Additional Disclaimer.** Internet marketing is an art and not a science. Any changes to your Internet marketing strategy, including SEO, Social Media Marketing, and Google Ads (AdWords), are at your own risk. Neither Jason McDonald nor the JM Internet Group nor Excerpti Communications, Inc. assumes any responsibility for the effect of any changes you may, or may not, make to your website or online marketing strategy based on the information in this guide.

## » ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# II

## BASICS

I love **analogies**! Thinking of SEO like fitness, for example, helps people realize that they need to set “fitness goals,” learn some tips and tricks about how to “get fit,” and then create a systematic plan (and stick with it) to achieve their goals. As opposed to having your head swimming with technical mumbo-jumbo, the *fitness analogy* helps you see that SEO is something you can do. It’s empowering.

Before we get into the technical details, I want to give you another **analogy** that will help you in your quest to get to the top of Google. **SEO is like getting a job**. It has its **job desired** (your *keywords*), its **resume** (your *website*), its **references** (your inbound *links*), and its job **interview** (your website *landing*).

In this Chapter, I will give you a *conceptual framework* to understand search engine optimization. Once you have a conceptual framework, you can then refer back to it as you dive into very specific tasks, such as optimizing a landing page or soliciting inbound links. It’s a map that will keep you oriented in the right direction.

**Let’s get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Understand that SEO Parallels Getting a Job
- » Keyword Research
- » Understand “On Page” SEO
- » Understand “Off Page” SEO
- » Set Landing Page Goals

## » UNDERSTAND THAT SEO PARALLELS GETTING A JOB

Let's consider the search for a job. How does the job market work? People want to “be found” as the “ideal” candidate for a position. So what do they do? Four important things:

**Job Desired – Identify the Desired Job.** Job seekers take a look inside their souls and identify the job they want. If they're smart, they take a look outside at the job market as well and look for **connection points** between the job of their dreams and the jobs that are in demand in the labor market. For example, my dream job is sipping margaritas in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, writing science fiction novels, but the demand for that isn't so high. So I've taken a passion for language and turned that into a job as an SEO writer and consultant. Notice how the “job desired” matches “keywords” as in (*SEO consultant*).

**Resume - Create a resume.** Job seekers create a keyword-heavy **resume** that explains the job that they want to get and their qualifications for that job. If, for example, they want a job as a *BMW auto mechanic*, they create a resume that emphasizes keywords like “auto mechanic,” “auto repair,” and even “BMW repair” by prominently displaying them in the right places, including the subject line of emails they send out to prospective employers. And employers “scan” resumes looking for those resumes that “match” their keywords. Notice how “keywords” are embedded in the written resume.

**References - Cultivate References.** Beyond a great resume, the next aspect of a job search is cultivating great **references**. Knowing the boss's spouse, having the head of the BMW auto mechanic school, or someone else important or influential put in a good word can elevate your resume to the top of the heap. In short, strong references get your resume looked at, substantiate that your resume is factually accurate, and possibly get you a job interview. Notice how “references” are external validations that you are as great as your resume claims you to be.

**Job Interview – Wow Them Face-to-Face.** Once you get their attention, what's next? The job **interview** is the next step towards landing the job; it's the “free glimpse” of what you have to offer that “sells” the employer on making a

financial commitment by hiring you. Notice how a “job interview” is a “free” taste of you as an employee. The use of something **free** is obvious *once you notice it*, and notice how strong websites usually offer customers something **free** as well.

The **marketing equation** is: **job desired > resume > references > job interview > job.**

Hopefully, you can already see that SEO is a lot like getting a job. How so?

**Identifying the job you want equals identifying keywords that are in demand.** Before you put virtual pen to virtual paper to build out your website, you have to understand your Business Value Proposition and who wants what you have to sell. “Keywords” connect what you have with what customers want. This is called “**keyword research.**”

**Creating a resume equals creating a strong, keyword-heavy website.** Your website, in a sense, is your business resume, and it needs to have keywords placed on it in strategic places to “talk to” Google as well as human searchers, and just as with a job search, you have to research the hot-button keywords that people are searching for and place those in strategic positions. This is called “**On Page**” SEO.

**Cultivating references equals getting links and going social.** Just as you cultivate references to get your resume elevated to the top of the heap, you cultivate inbound links, fresh buzz, and social authority to elevate your website to the top of Google searches. Getting other websites to link to you, positive reviews of your business on Google, and mentions on social media sites like Google+ or Twitter is called “**Off Page**” SEO.

**The job interview equals the website landing.** Once you get noticed, your next step is a fantastic job interview. The equivalent of the job interview is the **landing behavior** on your website. Once they land from Google, you want them

to “take the next step,” usually a registration or a sale, just as at a job interview, which leads to the final step, getting hired or making a sale.

The **SEO equation** is **keyword research > On Page SEO > Off Page SEO > website landing > sales inquiry or sale.**

Keep this conceptual framework that SEO is like a job search in the back of your head as you read through this Workbook. Here’s a simple model of the parallels:

**Job desired** = *keywords* = identify keywords that customers search for.

**Resume** = *On Page SEO* = create a keyword-heavy, easy-to-understand website.

**References** = *Off Page SEO* = solicit many inbound links, social authority / mentions, and freshness via blogging.

**Job Interview** = optimize the *landing page experience* to lead to a registration or a sale.

**Metrics** = is it working? Am I getting relevant job interviews (“inquiries”) and job offers (“sales”)?

## **Build a Better Resume (or Website)**

Once you realize that the process of SEO parallels the process of getting a job, you’ll realize something else. Just because the process is easy to understand does not mean that most people do it correctly. If you’ve ever had the (*mis*)fortune of having to look through job applications and resumes, for example, you can vouch for me that many (if not most) resumes are terrible. They’re hard to read, they’re ambiguous about the job desired, and they don’t systematically substantiate their claim that they are the “perfect” candidate for the job.

Most resumes, in short, stink.

Looking over to the Web, you'll realize that just because SEO is conceptually easy to understand does not mean that most Web sites are SEO-friendly. In fact, most websites are ambiguous at best vis-à-vis their keyword targets, have terrible landing experiences, and don't have any systematic link-building in place.

Most websites, in short, stink.

But just because most people have terrible resumes, or terrible websites, does not mean that yours has to stink, too. This is the first *hugely optimistic observation*. With a little knowledge and a little hard work, you can elevate your website above your competition. You can “build a better website” via SEO and vastly improve your performance on Google.

Of course, it depends on how competitive your industry is and how skilled your competition is. It varies industry by industry. But in my experience, most small business websites can see a vast improvement by following a few simple SEO guidelines.

Your website, just like your resume, does **NOT** have to be **perfect**. It just has to be **BETTER** than that of your competition. And your competition is not made of Albert Einsteins and Madame Curies, but just regular guys and gals, most of whom probably know less about SEO than you do.

## » KEYWORD RESEARCH

Let's drill down into the first element, “keyword research,” the equivalent of identifying a job that you want that's also in demand in the marketplace. We'll get into some cool tactics and tools in Chapter Two, but for now, here are the steps:

1. Write down your Business Value Proposition with an eye to the “words” that “describe” what you have that people want. (Here's a video on how to write your BVP: <http://jmlinks.com/54d>).
2. Look for “words” that connect “what you sell” with what “customers want.”
3. Brainstorm how customers might search Google to find your company, product, or service.

4. Write down a “keyword list” with special attention to those keywords that are really, really hot matches connecting a customer who’s “ready to buy” with “what you have to sell.”

At the end of this process, you’ll have a list of keywords that your customers type into Google. (If you need help on the marketing ideas that exist “before” SEO, consult my *The Marketing Book* at <http://jmlinks.com/twaggle>).

## » “ON PAGE” SEO

Let’s drill down into the second element, “On Page” SEO, the equivalent of a great resume. What are the steps? We’ll assume that you have your keyword list in hand; that is, you know “which job” you want, or in SEO terms, which keywords you want to optimize for. Once you know your keywords, where do you put them?

In terms of “On Page” SEO, the main places you put your keywords are as follows:

**Page Tags.** Place your keywords strategically in the right page tags, beginning with the TITLE tag on each page, followed by the header tag family, image alt attribute, and HTML cross-links from one page to another on your site.

**Keyword Density.** Write keyword-heavy copy for your web pages, and pay attention to writing quality. Complying with Google’s *Panda* update means placing your keywords into grammatically correct sentences and making sure that your writing contains similar and associated words vs. your keyword targets.

**Homepage SEO.** Use your homepage wisely by placing keywords in relatively high density on your homepage and, again, in natural syntax, as well as creating “one-click” links from your homepage to your subordinate pages.

**Website structure.** Organize your website to be Google-friendly, starting with keyword-heavy URLs, cross-linking with keyword text, and using sitemaps and other Google-friendly tactics. I also recommend writing a short, keyword-heavy **footer** on your website with links to your main **landing pages**.

“On Page” SEO is all about knowing your keywords and building keyword-heavy content that communicates your priorities to Google, just as a good resume communicates your job search priorities to prospective employers. We’ll investigate “On Page” SEO more deeply in Chapters Three and Four.

## **Write for Google and for Humans**

Among the trends of recent years and one getting stronger is the trend towards “natural syntax,” “semantic search,” and “artificial intelligence.” Google is getting smarter and smarter, which means that your prose needs to be more “natural” than ever. Answering customer questions via your website as if you were talking to a customer is a key writing strategy for the “new” On Page SEO in an environment of voice search and artificial intelligence. Yet, you want to write keyword-heavy content that is Google-friendly but also easy-to-read, relevant content that is good for humans. It’s not Google OR humans; it’s Google AND humans.

## » **“OFF PAGE” SEO**

Let’s drill down into the third element, “Off Page” SEO, the equivalent of great references. Here, you do not fully control the factors that help you with Google, so the game is played out in how well you can convince others to talk favorably about you and your website. Paralleling job references, the main strategic factors of “Off Page” SEO are as follows:

**Link Building.** As we shall see, links are the votes of the Web. Getting as many qualified websites to link back to your website, especially high authority websites as ranked (secretly) by Google, using keyword-heavy syntax, is what link building is all about. It’s that simple and that complicated.

**Social Authority / Mentions.** Social media is the new buzz of the Internet, and Google looks for mentions of your website on social sites like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook, as well as how robust your own social media profiles are.

**Online Reviews.** If you are a local business, customer reviews, especially on Google and, to a lesser extent, on Yelp and industry-specific websites like Avvo.com for lawyers and Healthgrades.com for doctors, etc., greatly influence your SEO performance. Accordingly, you want to solicit reviews from real, happy customers so that they write online reviews about your business on Google, Yelp, and other major review sites.

**Freshness.** Like a prospective employer, Google rewards sites that show fresh activity. “What have you done lately?” is a common job interview question, and in SEO, you need to communicate to Google that you are active via frequent content updates such as blog posts and press releases.

“Off Page” SEO is all about building external links to your site, just as getting good references is all about cultivating positive buzz about you as a potential employee. We’ll investigate “Off Page” SEO more deeply in Chapter Five. Oh, and due to the Google algorithm change called *Penguin*, we’ll emphasize that you want to cultivate *natural* inbound links as opposed to *artificial* links that scream “manipulation” at Google! It’s good, *believable* references that help you in a job search, and post-*Penguin*, it’s good, *believable* links that help you with SEO.

## » SET LANDING PAGE GOALS

Let’s drill down into the fourth element, “Landing Page Goals,” the equivalent of great job interview skills. The point of a great website isn’t just to get traffic from Google, after all. It’s to move that potential customer up your sales ladder – from website landing to a registration for something free (a “sales lead”) or perhaps even a sale.

So in evaluating your website, you want to evaluate each and every page and each and every page element for one variable: do they move customers up the **sales ladder**? Is the **desired action** (*registration* or *sale*) clearly visible on each page, and if so, is it enticing to the customer, usually with something free like a free download, free consult, free webinar, and the like?

Just as after a job interview, your family and friends ask whether you “got the job,” after a Web landing, you are asking yourself whether it “got the action,” such as a registration

or a sale. Web traffic, just like sending out resumes, is not an end in itself but a means to an end!

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on the basics of SEO explained in “plain English” at <http://jmlinks.com/17k>.

We shall now explore each of these topics in-depth.



# 1.1

## ATTITUDE

Most books on SEO start with technical details. What's a TITLE tag? How do you understand your Google PageRank? Which factors in the Google algorithm have changed recently? We'll get to all that, but I want to start this book with a pep talk about **attitude**.

*Attitude, they say, is everything.*

And nowhere is that truer than in SEO. This is an industry full of information overload, pretty rude intimidators of a technical geeky type, and an 800 lb. Gorilla (Google), that would really rather you just spend money on Google Ads advertising than understand how you can get to the top of Google without paying it a penny.

To succeed, you'll need a positive "can do" attitude.

**Let's get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Learn from Francie Baltazar-Schwartz that "Attitude is Everything."
- » Identify "Can Do" vs. "Can't Do" People.
- » Learn to Measure.
- »» Deliverable: Inventory Your Team & Get Ready.

### » FRANCIE BALTAZAR-SCHWARTZ AND ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

The Internet is a wonderful place, and Google sits pretty much at the center of it. Got a question? "Just *Google* it!" We certainly know the reality of "Just *Google* it" in terms of

customers looking for companies, products, and services. But it also goes for more important questions like the *meaning of life* (42), and *what is a LOLcat*, anyway?

For example, Google “Who said ‘Attitude is Everything?’” and you’ll find out that this quote is attributed to one Francie Baltazar-Schwartz. You can read it at <http://jmlinks.com/5i>. The point of “attitude is everything” is that you have two choices every day: either to have a **positive, can-do** attitude or to have a **negative, can’t do** attitude. (**Remember:** if you are reading this book in print format, visit <http://jmlinks.com/> and enter the JUMP code, in this case, “5i”).

This relates very dramatically to success at SEO, just as it does to success in pretty much everything else in life, from physical fitness to your job to your marriage.

How does it apply to SEO? Well, let’s look at the facts, and let’s look at the ecosystem of people and companies in the SEO industry.

**Fact No. 1.** SEO is technical, and at least on the surface, it seems pretty complicated and hard. So, if you start with the attitude that you “can’t do it,” you’re already on the path to defeat. If, in contrast, you start with the attitude that you can do it, that other people are clearly doing it (*people no smarter than you*), you’re on the path to success. **Attitude is everything.**

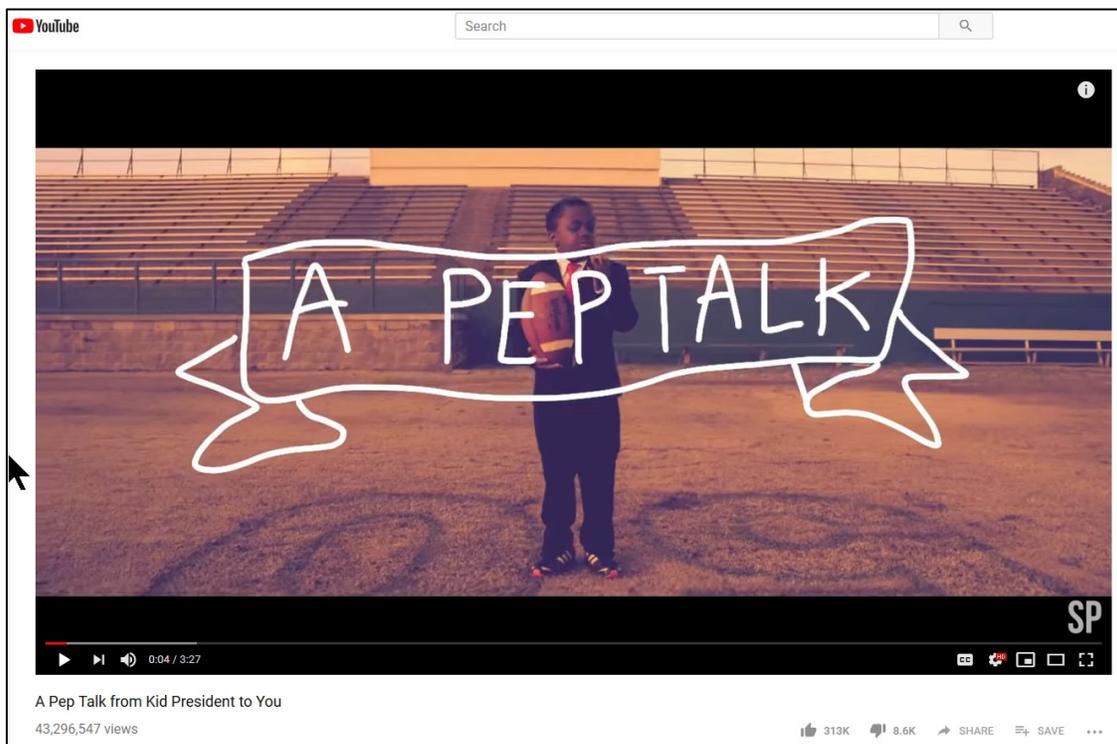
**Fact No. 2.** Google does not want anyone to believe that SEO is easy. In fact, because Google makes its money from *advertising* with nearly \$256 billion in revenue for 2021, of which \$209 billion came from ads (<http://jmlinks.com/56j>), it wants you, too, to believe that *advertising* is the way to go. Google has no incentive to explain how SEO works and in fact, has every incentive to do the opposite. *If you are intimidated by Google, if you believe every “official” statement from Google, you’re already on the path to defeat.* If, in contrast, you pay attention to the facts and realize that SEO is free, while ads cost money, that you can do SEO, and that you can get to the top of Google for free... you won’t worry about the propaganda from a multibillion-dollar corporation. **Attitude is everything.**

**Fact No. 3.** The SEO industry is full of so-called experts, gurus, tools providers, and others who pretty much make their money by intimidating normal folk into believing that SEO is incredibly complicated and only nerds with Ph.D. s in

computer science can do it. They want you to stay in a state of dependency and keep paying them the big bucks. So if you allow technical nerds to intimidate you, you're already on the path to defeat. If, in contrast, you realize that they aren't really any smarter than you and that SEO isn't just about technology; it's about words and concepts and marketing messages, you're on the path to success. **Attitude is everything.**

Oh, and as SEO becomes more and more social, you'll want to have an open mind about social media as well. You can really get yourself motivated by watching a video by "Kid President" (Robby Novak), who is twelve years old, has several million views on YouTube, and was actually invited to the White House by then-President Obama.

**VIDEO.** Watch a "Can Do" attitude video by "Kid President" at <http://jmlinks.com/5j>.



For your first **TO-DO**, therefore, concentrate your mind and create a **positive attitude**: this is going to be fun, this is going to be educational, this is going to be a journey! Your **attitude is everything** as to whether you'll succeed or fail at SEO!

In fact, since the video screenshot was taken, this video now tops 48 million views! If a *twelve-year-old* can get 48 million views and meet the President, don't you think you can at least get to page one of Google?

## » IDENTIFY “CAN DO” VS. “CAN’T DO” PEOPLE

In most situations, you'll need to depend on other people. In fact, the attitude of the people on your team (your webmaster, your content writers, your product marketing managers, your executives...) is also incredibly important. Are they “can do” or “can't do” sort of folks?

Henry Ford, the great industrialist, once made this clear observation:

“Whether you think you can or you think you can't--you're right.”  
— Henry Ford

In terms of SEO, there are those people who think that a) they can't learn it, or b) it can't be done. And, guess what: they're **right**. And there are those who think that a) they can learn it, and b) it can be done. And, guess what: they're **right**, too.

### **Which camp are you in? Your team members? Can, or can't?**

So for your second **TO-DO**, look around your organization and make a list of those people who need to be involved with your SEO project. For example:

**Management and Marketers.** These people are involved in the sense of understanding who your customers are, what you sell, and what the sales

objectives are for your website. Your website, after all, isn't an end in itself but a means to an end: more sales.

**Content Writers.** Who writes (or will write) content for the website? These people need at least a basic understanding of your keywords and, even better, an understanding of how “On Page” SEO works so that they know where to strategically place keywords on web content.

**Web Designers.** News flash: your website isn't just for humans! It's also for Google. You'll have to educate your web design team that your website needs to “talk” to Google just as much as it “talks” to humans. As we will learn, what Google likes (*text*) isn't generally what people like (*pictures*).

**Web Programmers.** The folks who program the backend, like your URL structure, your XML sitemaps, and all that technical stuff. Who are these people, and how will you get them on board for the SEO project?

**Link Builders.** Google heavily rewards websites that have many inbound links to them, so you'll need “link builders” to ask directories, trade associations or trade shows, bloggers, journalists, and other websites to link back to your website. What people in your company interface with outside websites and are in a position to solicit inbound links?

**Social Media and Outreach Experts.** Social media is the new wave in SEO, so you'll need those folks who are (or will be) active on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and the like to be “SEO aware” in the sense of how social media impacts SEO performance. You'll need folks who participate in social media and can encourage social influencers to share your website URLs. (For an in-depth discussion on social media marketing, see my *Social Media Marketing Workbook* at <http://jmlinks.com/smm>).

Indeed, if you have some real obstructionist “Can't Do” people, you'll need to strategize either how to a) **persuade** them to participate, b) **get them out of the way**, or c) **work around** them.

## » LEARN TO MEASURE

As you assemble your team, you'll want to get their buy-in on learning SEO. It isn't rocket science, but it's also not something you'll learn in a day. First, they'll need to learn the basics (as we discussed in the previous Chapter). Second, they'll need to learn many of the more esoteric topics as needed. Content writers, for example, will need to be keenly aware of keywords and how to write semantically friendly SEO text. Web programmers will need to understand XML sitemaps and so on. Third, they'll need to be committed to lifelong learning as SEO changes over time. A good strategy is to schedule monthly meetings or corporate email exchanges about your SEO progress.

Let's also talk a little about **measurement** and **metrics**. One of the biggest stumbling blocks to successful SEO is the idea that it can't be measured. It can. How so?

**Know your keywords.** Once you know your keywords, as you'll learn in Chapter 2.1, then you can start to measure your **rank** on target Google searches.

**Inbound search traffic.** Once you set up Google Analytics properly, as you'll learn in Chapter 6.1, you can measure your inbound "organic" traffic from Google, including some data on inbound keywords. You'll learn how people get to your website and what they do once they get there.

**Goals.** Every good website should have defined goals, usually registrations and/or sales. Once you define goals in Google Analytics, you can track what traffic converts to a sale and what doesn't. (Then you can brainstorm ways to improve it).

When you first start, you'll often have little idea of your target keywords, little idea of your rank on Google, and little idea of your traffic patterns from landings to conversions. But that doesn't mean SEO isn't a measurable activity! It just means you are not yet measuring.

Why is this important? As you set up your team and establish the right attitude, you want to establish the idea that SEO is measurable. If someone has crazy ideas (*such as Google doesn't pay attention to URL structure, or keywords don't matter*), you can measure these

ideas vs. correct ideas (*that keywords in TITLE tags do matter a great deal, keyword-heavy URLs help a lot*). Establishing a culture of measurability will help you get everyone on your team, help get even the most recalcitrant “Can’t Do” people to realize that SEO works, and help your team to SEO your website to actually generate sales or sales leads.

Measurability is a critical part of Step No. 1: **Setting (Measurable) Goals**.

## »» **DELIVERABLE: INVENTORY YOUR TEAM AND GET READY**

Now we’ve come to the end of Step 1.1, and your first **DELIVERABLE** has arrived. Open up a Word document and create a list of all the people who are involved with your website, from the marketing folks who identify the goals (sales or registrations?) to the content writers (those who create product descriptions, blog posts, or press releases), to the Web design people (graphic designers), to the Web programmers, and to your outreach team for social media and links. Make an inventory of who needs to be involved in what aspects of SEO, and if possible, set up weekly or monthly meetings about your SEO strategy.

At a “top secret” level, you might also want to indicate who has a “Can Do” and who has a “Can’t Do” attitude. You’ll want to work to bring everyone over into the “Can Do” column!

Consider having an “attitude is everything” meeting about SEO, and get everyone to stand up on the tabletops and shout: “We can do this!”



# 1.2

## GOALS

SEO, like physical fitness, can't be accomplished without **goals**. Are you training for a marathon or a sprint? Want to look better naked or just be healthier? Want to dominate Google for “industrial fans,” for “organic baby food,” or for “probate attorney St. Louis?” Is the purpose of your website to get sales leads or to sell products via eCommerce? SEO can tell you *how* to get to the top of Google, but it can't tell you *what* your company's *goals* are vis-à-vis potential customers. To succeed at SEO, you need to have a clear vision of your *sales ladder* starting at the customer *need* and then proceeding as follows: keyword search *query* → *landing* on your website → sales *inquiry* → *back and forth* → actual *sale*. For an eCommerce site, the goals and sales ladder would be the same, except that rather than a “sales inquiry,” the goal would be an actual website purchase.

**Let's get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Define Your Business Value Proposition
- » Identify Your Target Customers by Segment or Personas
- » Establish Marketing Goals
- »» Checklist: Goals Action Items
- »» Deliverable: A Business Value Proposition Worksheet

### » DEFINE YOUR BUSINESS VALUE PROPOSITION

What does your business sell? Who wants it, and why? In this Chapter, you'll sit down and fill out the “business value proposition worksheet.” A **BVP**, or “business value proposition,” is a statement that succinctly defines what your business does and the

value that it provides to customers. For example, a cupcake bakery bakes yummy cupcakes that people want to eat; a dry cleaner cleans people’s dirty clothes, and an automobile insurer provides insurance for people’s cars. You produce something that other people want, so what is it?

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on how to write a “Business Value Proposition” at <http://jmlinks.com/54d>.

## Define Your Business Value Proposition

One way to define your business value proposition is to look at other companies on the Web and “reverse engineer” their BVPs.

Here are some more examples, with links to sample websites.

For a Chicago retailer of Rolex watches, such as **Howard Frum Jewelers** (<http://www.howardfrum.com/>), the business value proposition is selling both new and used Rolex watches, plus servicing and repairing Rolex watches.

For an industrial fan company like **Industrial Fans Direct** (<http://www.industrialfansdirect.com/>), the business value proposition is to provide quality industrial fans for harsh environments such as factories or farms.

For a San Francisco mortgage broker, such as **Jim Wilson**, the business value proposition is to help people get cheap mortgages easily. His website is <https://www.jimwilsonhomeloans.com>.

For any business, a *business value proposition* is your “elevator pitch” to a potential customer - what do you offer that they want?

For your first **TO-DO**, write a sentence or short paragraph that succinctly defines what your business does and how it provides value for customers. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so) , and click on the link to the “business value proposition worksheet.”

## » IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET CUSTOMERS BY SEGMENT OR PERSONAS

Your *business value proposition* explicitly describes the relationship between what you sell and what they want. Now dig deeper: *segment* your customers into definable groups or what marketers call “customer personas.” Literally, imagine a potential customer. What does she look like? What does she want? What are her pain points? Imagine her unique characteristics and needs and how they point to how her “needs” can be addressed by your product or service.

For instance, **Howard Frum Jewelers** might segment its customers into the following personas:

- Chicago office workers seeking quick and convenient watch repairs for their Rolex watches during their lunch hours (*Time-conscious and location-sensitive*).
- Folks looking to buy “used” Rolex watches as collectibles (*Watch collectors*).
- Chicago residents looking to purchase Rolex watches (*Luxury and/or Rolex watch lovers*).
- USA residents who own Rolex watches but live in smaller cities and towns yet need repair (*Mail-in Rolex repairs nationwide*).

Similarly, a Las Vegas real estate broker might segment his customers by space need – office, warehouse, retail. Moreover, there might be a segmentation based on those looking to rent vs. buy. And a Miami divorce attorney might segment her customers or clients into men vs. women, those with substantial property vs. those without, and those who have children vs. those who do not.

**In summary, a “segment” or “buyer persona” is a group of like-minded customers.**

For your second **TO-DO**, open up the “business value proposition worksheet” and identify your **customer segments** or **buyer personas** – customers who

differ by type (income level, geographic location), by need (high end, low end, rent vs. buy), or even geographic location. Try to see your customers as specific groups with specific needs rather than one mega amorphous group. Begin to think about how each might search Google differently, using different keywords.

For a fun tool to help you visualize your buyer personas, visit <http://jmlinks.com/29s>. And if you're new to marketing, let me suggest my book, *The Marketing Book*, at <http://jmlinks.com/twaggle>, which is a “prequel” to this book on SEO. It will help you overview your entire marketing strategy in a quick and easy read.

## » ESTABLISH MARKETING GOALS

Moving from business value proposition and customer personas, it's time to think about definable **goals** or **actions** for your website. For most businesses, a good goal is to get a registration / email address / inquiry in exchange for something free such as a free consult, eBook, or webinar. A Las Vegas real estate company, for instance, might want visitors to the website to “send a message” about their property needs or register for a free consult with a leasing specialist. Similarly, a divorce attorney might want a potential client to reach out for a free phone consult, and a watch repair shop might just want people to call or email to discuss their watch repair needs and get directions to the shop.

For most businesses, marketing **goals** on the Web usually boil down to –

- A Website **registration, contact form, or email via the website** – for a free consult, a software download, a free e-book, a newsletter sign-up, etc.
  - Note: a **phone call** generated via the website should count the same as the above.
- A **sale** – an e-commerce transaction such as the purchase of a candy gift tin on an e-store or an iPhone skin via PayPal.

A well-constructed website will lead customers to an easy-to-see first step. Here's a screenshot from <http://www.reversemortgage.org/>, one of the top websites for the Google search “reverse mortgage,” with the goal marked by a red arrow:



*Reversemortgage.org* knows what it wants: first, to **rank** at the top of Google search for “reverse mortgage,” second, to **get the click**; and third, for a potential customer to start towards the **goal**, i.e., the process of *finding a lender* (and giving the Website his name, email address, and phone number for a sales follow up!).

Common marketing goals are as follows:

1. **Rank high** on a Google search query (“reverse mortgage” in this case).
2. **Get the click** from Google to your website.
3. Once they land, get them to take the “first step” or “**goal**” (usually fill out a feedback form, send an email via the website, or for an eCommerce site to make a first purchase.).
4. **Follow up** with them by email or phone, if necessary, to complete the sales process.

## Your Sales Ladder

Defining the next steps or goals of your website is inseparable from defining your **sales ladder**. Web searchers are actively looking for an answer to their query, and they are anything but passive: if they don't see what they want, *click, bounce, bye*, and they're gone.

*(Some marketers talk of a “sales funnel,” a concept I do not like because it implies that customers are **passive**, like little marbles that fall into your website and into your registration or sale. I do not think people on the Web (or in life) are passive at all. I think of people as **active** searchers, searching Google, clicking to websites, finding what they want (or not), and being quite skeptical about whether they should take the next action. Another way marketers talk about this is the “customer journey.” Regardless of what you call it, think about the “journey” a customer goes through – from awareness of a need or desire, to various Google searches, to research on websites, to back-and-forth, to an actual purchase.)*

## Customers Are Like Salmon

Let me explain why thinking of customers as jumping “up” a “sales ladder” is a better way to think than “down” a “sales funnel.”

I think of *customers* like *salmon* jumping up from sea level in frigid Alaskan rivers, jumping higher and higher up fish ladders (put there by the Alaskan Department of Fish and Game) to get to their goal: the spawning ground. The fish are motivated (*after all, there's mating to be done*), and they are **active** participants in the process. You can't “bait” them with junk either: they need something good at the end of the process.

A good Alaskan fishery expert doesn't engineer one **huge high** jump for the salmon but rather a series of **smaller, easier-to-jump** hurdles that can move the fish from goal one to goal two, etc. Why? Because if the first jump is too high and too scary, the fish won't make it.

Similarly, make your own “first step” non-threatening and easy! Don't attempt to go from a website landing to a major purchase; rather, break the process into smaller, easier, and less threatening “baby steps.” One of the best early steps in your goals is to give away something **free**, like a free consultation, free eBook, or free Webinar.

## GIVE AWAY SOMETHING FREE IN EXCHANGE FOR CONTACT INFORMATION

Having something **free** (a *free* webinar, a *free* consultation, a *free* e-book) is a tried and true way to make the first step of your ladder easy and non-threatening. People love the concept of “free” and will often give away their email and phone contact information for something free that is also useful. (*From your perspective, this then gives you their email and/or phone number for you and your sales staff to follow up on*). If you are selling something, think of a free sample or money-back offer; anything that reduces the risk of making that first buying decision.

A good example of this is in the hair loss / hair restoration industry. Take a look at Oxford Biolabs, a purveyor of hair restoration products at <https://us.oxfordbiolabs.com/>. Notice how they have links to a “free eBook” and “Buy Now” in the header on every page. Here’s a screenshot:



In other words, they have a way for you to “nibble” on a free eBook if you’re not quite ready and a garish “Buy Now” button if you are. This is a website that knows the goals it wants users to perform.

Using this strategy of free and/or clear goals, make the first step of your sales ladder exciting, enticing, and ideally free!

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on the importance of giving away something free on your website at <http://jmlinks.com/17p>.

## **Don't Make Customers Think!**

Your customers are busy, harried people. The phone is ringing, the baby is crying, the boss is there waiting outside the office as they search Google for products or services. They're busy, multi-tasking people. The design of your website needs to be easy and non-threatening from the perspective of a customer. If you ponder this "as if" you were "inside" the head of the customer, for example, he would be thinking something like the following (using the example of a person who has *international tax problems* and is looking for a CPA or accountant with knowledge of international tax issues):

1. **Customer identifies a need or desire.** "I have income tax issues with respect to international taxes. I need help doing my bookkeeping and preparing my taxes for state, federal, and international tax compliance."
2. **Customer turns to Google.** "I think I'll search Google for 'international tax accountants' in Oklahoma City, OK" (which is where he lives).
3. **Customer refines his keywords.** "I will type into Google searches such as 'international tax CPA,' 'Accountant for International Tax problems OKC', and 'accounting firm overseas taxation in Oklahoma City.'"
4. **Customer browses Google results.** I will browse the first three or four listings on Google (*often ignoring the ads*), and click over to the first website at the top of Google.
5. **Customer clicks FROM Google TO each website.** He thinks to himself, "Hm. This looks interesting! They seem to do international taxes, but I don't know...what else is on this website?"
6. **Customer sees a free offer, or first easy step on the sales ladder.** "Oh look, they have a YouTube video that explains their firm, let me watch that."
7. **Customer takes the next easy, non-threatening step on the sales ladder.** "That was pretty good, but oh look, they have a 'free consultation by phone'

offer. Let me fill out their feedback form with my name, email address, telephone number, and a good time to call.”

8. **Customer transitions from the Web to human to human interaction.** Ring, ring. “Who is it?” “Jason McDonald Accountants, we see you are interested in our free 20-minute consult.” “Yes, I am... I have these international tax problems... blah, blah, blah.” (Conversation with the customer begins).
9. **Customer consummates the sale.** Enough trust has been established, and the customer signs up for the service.

At the end of this process from customer *need* to keyword *search query* to *landing* to *browsing* the website to taking the *easy free actions* such as watching a YouTube video and signing up for a free consultation; hopefully, the lead turns into a sale. What you want to do for your own company is take out a piece of paper and outline steps similar to the ones above. Work backward from #9 to #1, and customize the process for your own company, product, and/or service.

You will then see that keywords start the process on Google, but the process (hopefully) ends on your website with a sale or sales lead.

## Set up a Focus Group

Indeed, it’s a good idea to get friends, family, or others outside your company to come in as a “focus group” and have them look at your website and attempt to find your goals. If they struggle, you need to revise your website to make it easy. **KISS:** *keep it simple, stupid* is a good motto for effective website design!

If ordinary people can understand your website, and can clearly see the “next step” that they should take, like a free consultation, free webinar, or free eBook download, then your website works. If not, you need to redesign it.

## Put it All Together

For your fourth **TO-DO**, open up your “business value proposition worksheet” and brainstorm your desired web landing next steps or goals (registrations and/or sales) as well as your sales ladder, including the possible use of something “free” to make that first step easy for customers.

For extra credit, begin to think about how you will **measure** these goals. As we will learn in Chapter 6.1, you can use Google Analytics to measure goals such as registrations or sales. But you can also use tactics like call tracking software (for a sample call tracking vendor, check out *CallRail* at <http://jmlinks.com/34z>), special toll-free 800 numbers, vanity phone extensions, and offer codes to track whether someone is coming from a Web search to a phone call into your call center.

Goals and measurability go hand-in-hand.

### »» CHECKLIST: GOALS ACTION ITEMS

Test your knowledge of goals! Take the *Goals and BVP quiz* at <http://jmlinks.com/qzbv>. Next, here are your goals **Action Items**:

- Define** your business value proposition and write a short, one-paragraph summary of it. What do you sell?
- Brainstorm and identify your **buyer personas**. Who wants what you sell?
  - Identify key “**situational**” aspects of your buyer personas, such as a “person looking to buy a new car” or a “person who wants to understand social security.”
- Identify **marketing goals** for your website, namely –
  - Early-stage goals** such as ranking on Google or web traffic.

❑ **Intermediate stage goals** such as registrations for a free giveaway like an eBook or eLetter

❑ **Late-stage goals** such as sales leads and/or eCommerce sales

❑ As part of your **content marketing strategy**, identify items that you can give away for “**free**” in exchange for capturing customer names, email addresses, and contact information. This might be a “free consultation,” a “white paper,” or an “ebook.”

### »» **DELIVERABLE: A COMPLETED BUSINESS VALUE PROPOSITION WORKSHEET**

Now that we’ve come to the end of Step 1.2, you should have your **DELIVERABLE** ready: a completed **business value proposition worksheet**. This worksheet should define your business value proposition, customer segments, search paths, desired next steps (goals), and your sales ladder, and even how you plan to measure customer progress along the sales ladder. In Chapter 2.1, we will turn to defining your keywords (which builds upon this knowledge), but first, let’s turn to the “big picture” of how SEO works.



# 2.1

## KEYWORDS

If Step #1 is “Set the Right Expectations,” Step #2 is to define your **keywords**. Customers start their quest to find you online by typing in **keywords** or **key phrases** into Google. (For simplicity’s sake, I’ll use the word *keyword* to mean either a *single* or *multi-word* phrase as a search engine query). Identifying **customer-centric keywords** is the foundation of effective SEO. Your best keywords match your **business value proposition** with **high-volume, high-value keywords** used by your customers.

- In **Step 2.1**, we’ll brainstorm our list of keywords, focusing on “getting all the words” on paper as a **keyword brainstorm** document.
- In **Step 2.2**, we’ll turn to organizing these keywords into a structured **keyword worksheet**.

For now, don’t worry about how to *organize* your keywords. Your goal in this Chapter is to *identify* **all** your possible keyword targets on paper; this Chapter is about brainstorming your **keyword universe**.

**Let’s get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Brainstorm Your Keywords
- » Use Google Tricks to Identify Possible Keywords
- » Reverse Engineer Competitors’ Keywords
- » Use Even More Free Keyword Discovery Tools
- » Understand Some Keyword Theory

»» Checklist: Keyword Action Items

»» Deliverable: Keyword Brainstorm Worksheet

## » BRAINSTORM YOUR KEYWORDS

Sit down in a quiet place with a good cup of coffee or tea, or if you prefer, a martini, i.e., *anything to get your ideas flowing!* Your first **TO-DO** is to brainstorm the **keywords** that a customer might type into Google that are relevant to your company, your product, and/or your service. Ask yourself and your team:

*When a potential customer sits down at Google, what words do they type in?*

*Which keywords are DEFINITELY those of your customers?*

*Which keywords are CLOSE to a decision to buy? Which are farther away, earlier in the customer journey?*

*Which customer segments or buyer personas use which keywords, and how might keywords differ among your customer segments?*

*Which keywords match which product or service lines as produced by your company?*

For example, let's say that you sell financial consulting services. Your target customers are persons aged 50 – 65 who are affluent and need financial help. You might imagine that they are sitting down at Google with their spouse, wondering about their finances, and they might Google –

How do we apply for social security?

What's a financial planner?

What's the difference between a ROTH IRA and a traditional IRA?

Who's the best financial planner in Milwaukee?

Tax advisors for retirees near me.

Reverse mortgage vs. traditional mortgage.

How does a spouse take his or her partner's social security benefits?

Etc.

## Conduct a Keyword Brainstorming Session

A good way to do this exercise is to set up a formal **keyword brainstorming session** with your marketing team (it might be just you by yourself, or it might be your CEO, your marketing manager, and a few folks from the sales staff). Devote at least ONE HOUR to brainstorming keywords; close the door, turn off the cell phone, tell your secretary to “hold all calls,” and start drinking (either coffee or martinis).

*Brainstorm, brainstorm, brainstorm the keywords that customers are typing into Google. Try not to miss any possible keyword combinations!*

*Do this, first, individually – take out a piece of paper, and write keyword ideas down WITHOUT talking to the others in your group.*

*Don't be shy. Don't leave anything out. The goal is to get EVERYTHING on paper, no matter how ridiculous it might be.*

*After folks have written down their ideas one-by-one, have a group session and go over all the keywords each person has identified.*

*Drink some more coffee or more martinis, and keep brainstorming – write all possible keywords on a whiteboard, a piece of paper, or a Word / Google document.*

Don't censor yourself because there are no wrong answers! The goal of this exercise is to get the complete “universe” of all possible keywords that customers might type into Google.

“Think like a customer” sitting at his or her computer screen at Google:

- **Assume you are a completely new, novice customer.** Assume you know next to nothing. What single words or multi-word phrases (keywords) would you type into Google?
- **Segment your customers into different “buyer personas.”** What keywords might each group use, and how would they differ from other groups?
- **Are there any specific “helper” words that a potential customer might use?** Common helper words specify geographic locality (e.g., “San Francisco,” “Berkeley,” “San Jose”), for example. Others specify things like “free,” “cheap,” “trial,” or “information.”
- **Don’t miss your synonyms and adjacent terms!** If you are a “lawyer,” don’t miss “attorney.” If you are a “dry cleaner,” don’t miss “wash and fold” or “laundry service.” If you are an “SEO expert,” don’t miss “SEO consultant” or “digital marketing expert.” If you are an orthopedic surgeon, don’t miss “knee doctor” or “hip specialist.”

If you’re working with a team in multiple locations or your team members can’t all meet at the same time, there’s an online tool called “Seed Keywords” at <http://jmlinks.com/29f>. Take each buyer persona or buyer scenario and type it into this tool. Then distribute the URLs to your team to collect their individual ideas as to how a customer might search Google.

To conclude this first **TO-DO**, open up the “keyword brainstorm worksheet” in either Word or PDF, and begin to fill it out as completely as possible. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (enter the password “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “keyword brainstorm worksheet.”

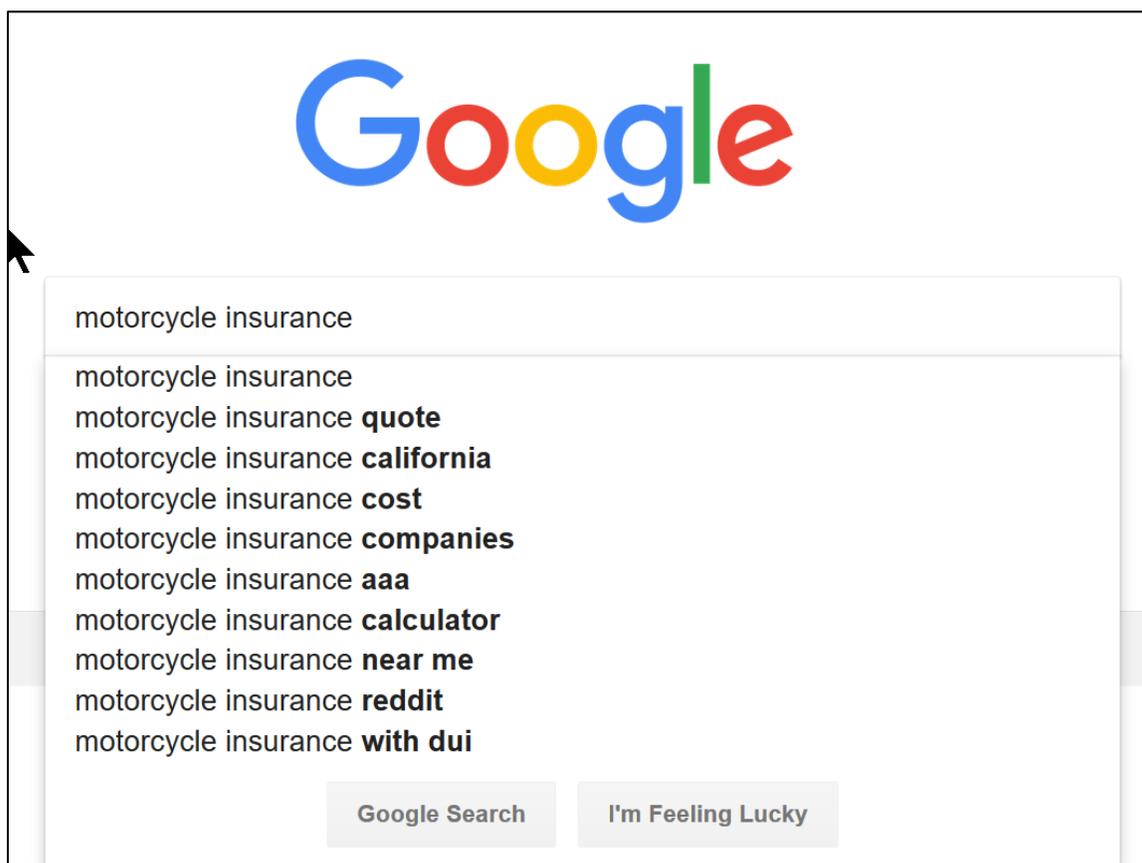
For right now, don't worry about the *organization* of your keywords. Don't police your thoughts. Write down every word that comes to mind - synonyms, competitor names, misspellings, alternative word orders. Let your mind wander. This is the keyword discovery phase, so don’t exclude anything!

## » USE GOOGLE TRICKS TO IDENTIFY POSSIBLE KEYWORDS

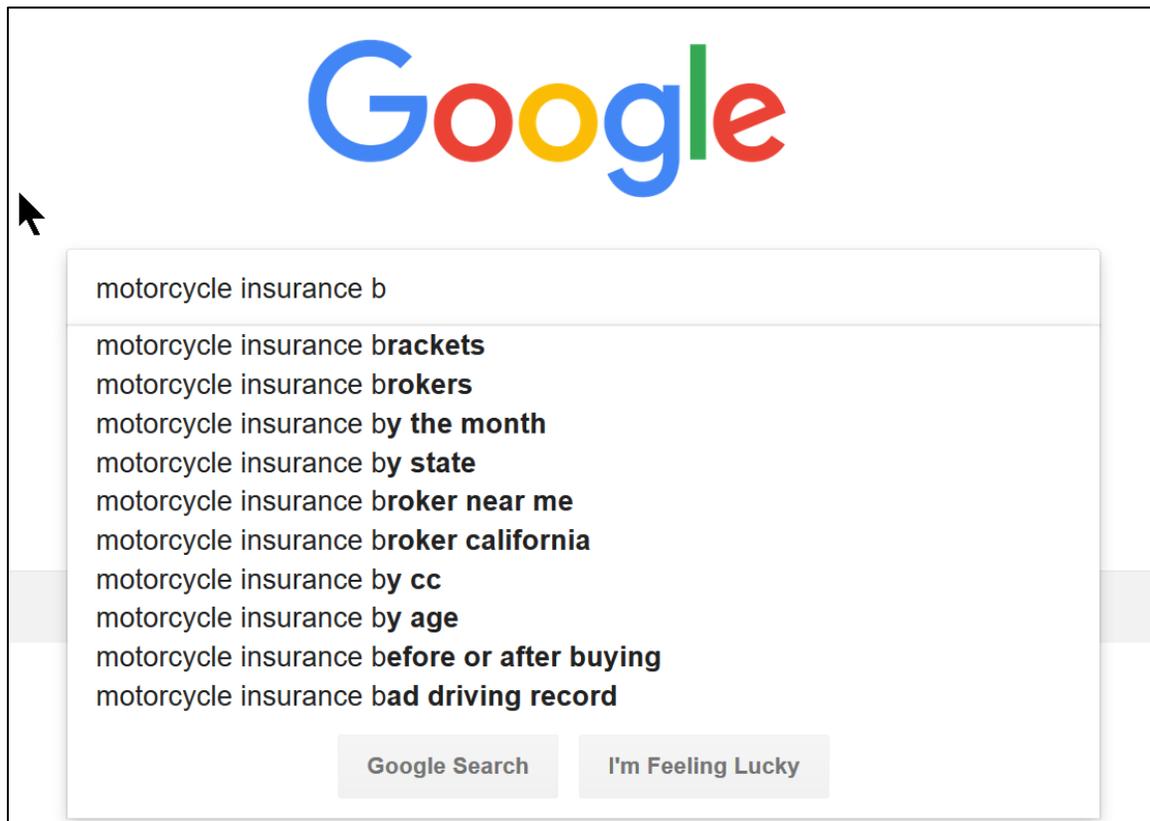
With a list of just a few keywords from your brainstorm session, it's time to turn to some Google tricks and tools to beef up your keyword list from these “seed” or “starter” keywords. You can find a complete list of keyword discovery tools in the companion *Marketing Almanac (Keywords Chapter)* or on my SEO dashboard (available at <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>), but here are my favorite strategies starting with Google's own free tools.

First, simply go to Google and start typing a keyword. Pay attention to the pull-down menu that automatically appears. This is called **Google Suggest** or **Autocomplete** and is based on actual user queries. It's a quick and easy way to find “helper” words for any given search phrase. You can also place a space (hit your space bar) after your target keyword and then go through the alphabet typing “a”, “b”, etc.

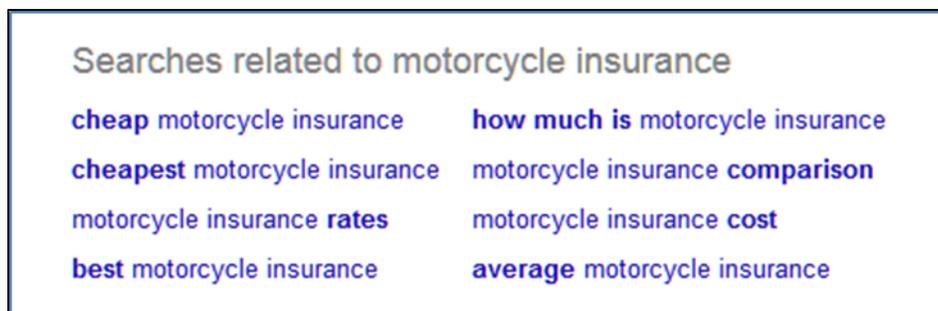
Here's a screenshot of **Google Suggest** using the key phrase “motorcycle insurance:”



Hit your space key after the last letter of the last keyword (e.g., after *motorcycle insurance*), and more keyword suggestions appear. You can also type the letters of the alphabet – a, b, c, etc., and Google will give you suggestions. Here’s a screenshot for the letter “b”:



Second, type in one of your target keyword phrases and scroll to the bottom of the Google search page. Google will often give you **related searches** based on what people often search on after their original search. Here’s a screenshot of Google’s related keywords for “motorcycle insurance” -



Note the **helper words** it tells you people use to search: *cheap, rates, best, “how much,” comparison, cost, and average*. These are wonderful clues as to how customers search Google. You can also click on a “related keyword,” then hit the space key to see more auto-completes, type in “a,” “b,” or “c,” etc., as well as scroll to the bottom and look at related searches.

**VIDEO.** Watch a quick video tutorial on how to use Google autocomplete and related searches to generate keyword ideas at <http://jmlinks.com/18n>.

In this way, you can use Google autocomplete and related searches to quickly and efficiently brainstorm your keyword list.

## Ubersuggest

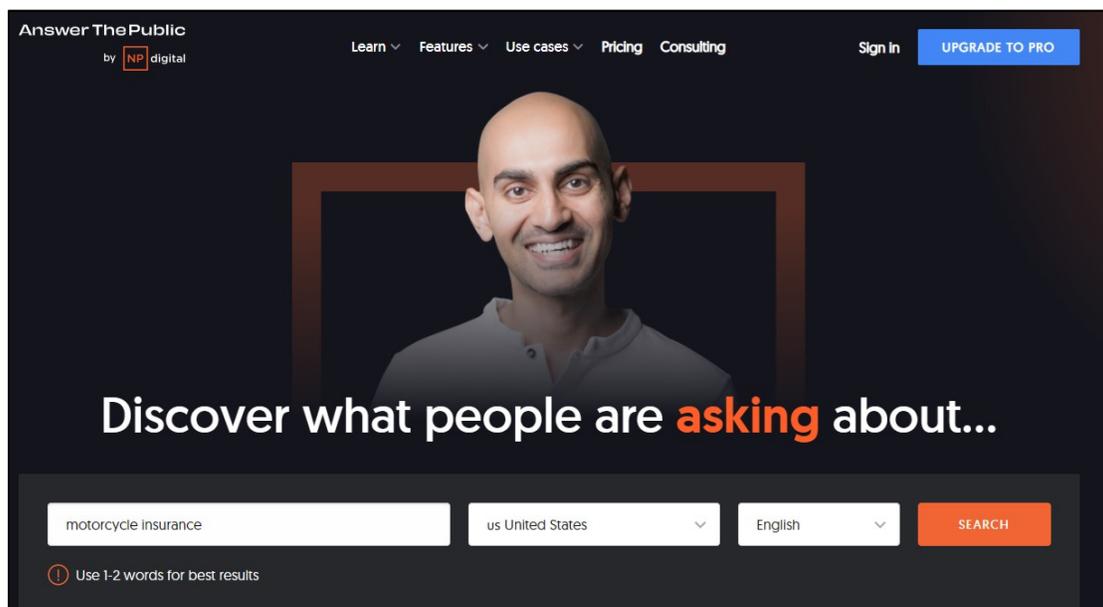
A fantastic third-party keyword tool is **Ubersuggest**. It basically types through the alphabet for you and gives you closely related keyword phrases. Here are your steps:

1. Visit Ubersuggest via <http://jmlinks.com/35a>.
2. Type in a “seed” or “starter keyword” such as “motorcycle insurance” in the box.
3. Click on “keyword ideas” on the left.
4. Add relevant keywords to your list.

Ubersuggest also provides volume and CPC (cost per click) data, but for now, just use the tool to formulate keyword ideas. It is especially good at identifying helper words. In the case of “motorcycle insurance,” we get “quote,” “cost,” and “online,” for example.

## Two More Incredible Free Tools

A second incredible free tool for keyword discovery is **Answer the Public** at <http://jmlinks.com/51e>. Visit the site, ignore the creepy man who “welcomes” you on the entry screen, and enter a starter keyword such as “car accident.” The tool returns a list of questions, suggestions, and other interrelated phrases that are all fantastic for brainstorming. Here’s a screenshot:



A third tool is **Twinwords Ideas** at <http://jmlinks.com/48e>. Again, just enter a starter or seed keyword. Twinword provides not only keyword suggestions but also volume and value (more on volume and value in a moment). For now, use these fun, free tools to accelerate your brainstorming process and make sure you identify each and every possible relevant keyword that a potential customer might type into Google.

## Keyword Patterns

As you work on your keyword brainstorming session, remember that you're looking for these types of keywords:

- **Core keywords** (often also called *anchor*, *starter*, or *seed* keywords). These are the minimum necessary to make a relevant search query. Examples would be “knee doctor,” “knee surgeon,” or “orthopedic surgeon.”
- **Synonyms.** These are words that mean essentially the same thing. “Lawyer” vs. “attorney,” “doctor” vs. “surgeon” vs. “specialist,” “car” vs. “auto” vs. “automobile.” It is critical to identify all **synonyms**, as a search for “knee *doctors*” is not the same as a search for “knee *surgeons*.”
- **Helper words.** These are words that are added to the core keyword or key phrase, such as “quote,” “online,” or “free” in the case of “motorcycle insurance.”

You should already begin to see patterns, realizing that helpers can cross many keyword types and that synonyms such as lawyer vs. attorney exist. You should also note that people generally use about 6<sup>th</sup>-grade level English to type into Google. Almost always, the 6<sup>th</sup>-grade level word like “knee doctors” will have more volume than the Ph.D. level word like “orthopedic surgeons.”

**Don't let reality confuse you!** A search for “NYC knee doctors” is not the same as a search for “NYC knee surgeons” or “New York City knee specialists” even though “in reality,” they are the same thing. We're playing a **word** game with Google, not a game about **reality**, and it's a rookie mistake to think that Google will figure out that a website that only mentions “orthopedic surgeon” is also the same thing as one that mentions “knee doctors.”

*Google is a machine, not a mind reader, so you need to capture every relevant word pattern at this phase. Don't miss synonyms or adjacent keywords!*

For your third **TO-DO**, open up your “keyword brainstorm worksheet” and write down the keywords garnered from these free tools. You want a messy, broad, and complete list of the “universe” of possible customer keywords via your own brainstorming process, via reverse engineering your competitors, via Google tools such as autocomplete and related searches, and via third-party tools like Ubersuggest.

## » REVERSE ENGINEER COMPETITORS

After you’ve completed this first wave of brainstorming, you and your group members should then do some searches on Google for target keywords to identify high-ranking websites. Take a few of the keywords you’ve already identified and type them into Google. As you search Google, identify your “Google competitors,” that is, companies that are already on page one of the Google results for your target keywords. You’ll want to **reverse engineer** their keywords.

Here are your steps:

1. Type a keyword into Google from your list.
2. Identify the top three or four websites that show up, especially ones that are companies / competitors.
3. Click over to each ranking website one by one.

Next, you’re going to view the HTML source code of their ranking page. Here’s how.

First, click over to their homepage or whatever page is showing up on page one of Google for a search that matters to you. Next, view the HTML source code of this page. To do this, in Firefox and Chrome, take your mouse and *right click*, then **View, Page Source**. In Internet Explorer, use **View, Source** on the file menu. **CTRL+U** will also pull up the source code for any web page. Finally, find the following tags in the HTML source code:

```
<Title>
```

```
<Meta Name="Description" Content="...">  
<Meta Name="Keywords" Content="...">
```

If you have trouble finding these HTML tags, use CTRL+F (on a PC) or Command+F (on a Mac) on your keyboard, and in the dialog box type

*<title (to find the TITLE tag) (Note: you need that “<” character!)*

*description (to find the META DESCRIPTION tag)*

or

*keywords (to find the META KEYWORDS tag)*

Note that there are some vagaries in the rules of HTML. So while it’s always <Title> for the TITLE tag, the DESCRIPTION or KEYWORDS word can be close to or far away from the word META. So you may have to play around with CTRL+F / find to locate these tags. Also, while every page must have a TITLE tag, not every page will have a META DESCRIPTION or META KEYWORDS tag. Don’t worry if you don’t find each of these three tags on every page, as not every page follows correct HTML or uses all tags.

And, for now, don’t worry about what these tags do. We’re just using them as a tool to brainstorm keyword ideas.

Here’s a screenshot of the homepage source code for “Social Security Advisors” (<https://www.socialsecurityadvisors.com/>) – a top-ranked website for the query “social security consultants” on Google:

```
<!DOCTYPE html>
<HTML lang="en">
<HEAD>
  <script src="http://cdn.optimizely.com/js/325871069.js"></script>
  <meta http-equiv="X-UA-Compatible" content="IE=edge,chrome=1">
  → <TITLE>Social Security Advisors - Maximizing Your Social Security</TITLE>
  <LINK rel="shortcut icon" href="/images/favicon.ico"/>
  <META CHARSET="utf-8">
  <meta name="Description" content="Social Security Advisors - Dedicated to
maximizing social security benefits for our clients through customized Social Security
strategies. Let us help you obtain your maximum social security benefit." />
  → <meta name="Keywords" content="Social Security, social security office, social security
death, social security locations, online social security, apply for social security,
eligibility social security, social security cola, ssa gov, disability, disability
insurance, disability benefits, worker's compensation, worker's comp, social security
replacement, social security retirement benefits, maximum social security, social
security retirement age, social security age, social security payments, social security
number, social security administration, Social Security Plus, Social Security Advisors,
retirement Benefits, retire, retirement, retirement benefit, family benefits, Higher
Social Security Check, Increased Benefits, More Social Security Money, Bigger Benefits,
Retire Early, Larger Social Security Benefit, Increase Social Security, Form 521,
Reapply for Social Security, Social Security Strategy, Social Security Strategies,
Spousal Benefit, Spouse Benefit, Divorced Spousal Benefit, Divorced Spouse Benefit,
Disability Benefits, socialsecurity.gov, social security advisors, social security card
replacement, social security calculator, social security tax, social security act,
```

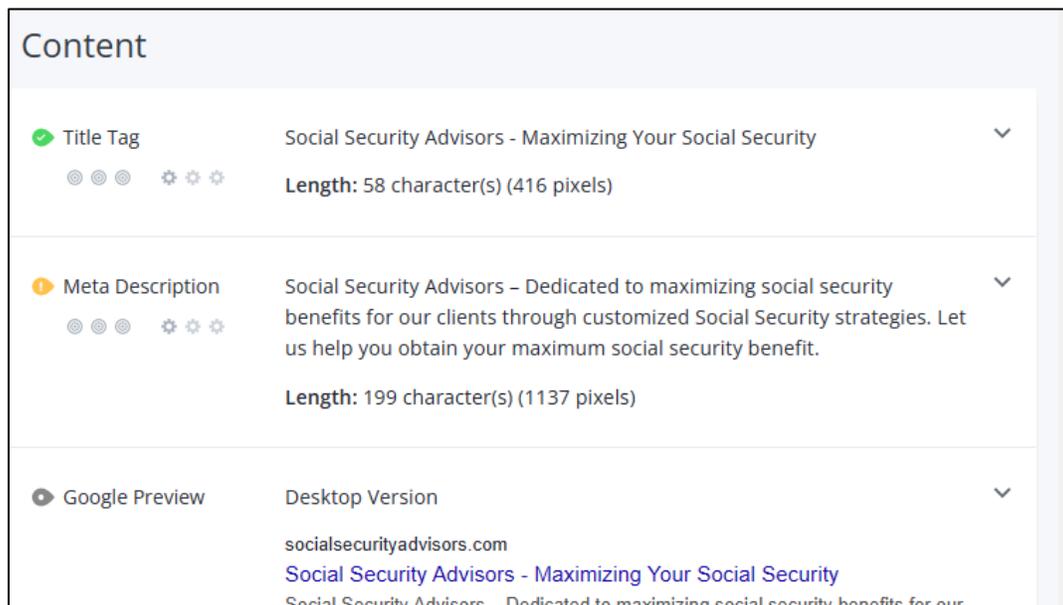
Note the three key tags are visible: TITLE, META DESCRIPTION, and KEYWORDS. Don't worry for now what they "mean" (and, in fact, the KEYWORDS tag is ignored). Simply use this "view source" method as a way to identify the keywords your highly-ranked competitors have identified for their SEO.

In this way, you can take a starter keyword, find competitors that rank high, look at their HTML source code for TITLE, META DESCRIPTION, and KEYWORD and then identify synonyms and helpers. Feed these keywords back into your other tools, and within just an hour or so you can brainstorm the "universe" of relevant keywords.

## Tag Analysis Tools

There are a few easy-to-use tools that will reduce your eye strain and help you wade through all that messy and annoying HTML code. One of the best is an “extension” for the Chrome browser called WooRank (<http://jmlinks.com/56k>).

Here’s a screenshot for <https://www.socialsecurityadvisors.com/>:



Don’t worry for now about what the tags do for SEO. Just use this tool to scroll through a competitor or high-ranking webpage and “cherry-pick” it for good keywords. If you scroll down the tool, it also provides a thorough analysis of keyword density, tags, links, etc. For even more tools, access the SEO Dashboard at <http://jmlinks.com/seodash> and look at the “Page Tags” section.

## Read Out Loud

As you look at competitor source code and the tool analysis, read the results out loud to your group members. That is, read the <TITLE> tag of your competitor’s ranking page, the META DESCRIPTION tag, and the KEYWORDS tag out loud. Read some of the data output from the tool analysis as well.

As you read tags and content out loud, listen for keywords, and keep in mind the question, “Would a customer likely type this into Google?” The goal of viewing the source of your competitors’ pages is to “steal” their keyword ideas and write down any relevant keywords onto your “keyword brainstorm” document.

**VIDEO.** Watch a quick video tutorial on how to use “view source” to reverse engineer competitors at <http://jmlinks.com/5k>.

### **A Note about the Keywords Meta Tag**

Note that at this point, you are just using “View Source” to “reverse engineer” your competitors and their keywords. The TITLE and META DESCRIPTION tags are very important for On Page communication, as they communicate keywords to Google. The META KEYWORDS tag, however, is ignored. That said, many people still use the META KEYWORDS tag, and it’s a useful window into your competitor’s thought process. *(It isn’t always in use, so you may not always find it in the HTML source code)*. So, at this point, you’re just peeking behind the curtain at their keyword targets to double-check your own keyword list and identify any keyword patterns you may have missed in our own brainstorming session. Don’t worry (yet) about what the HTML tags do, including the fact that the META KEYWORDS tag actually does nothing.

For your second **To-DO**, open up your “keyword brainstorm worksheet,” and jot down the top five competitors who appear at the top of Google for your target keywords, use the tactics above to view their source, and then write down keyword ideas taken from their TITLE, META DESCRIPTION, and META KEYWORDS tags as well as the WooRank Chrome extension tool.

This is a fun way to double-check your own brainstorming against your competitors; the goal is to leave no stone unturned, not to miss any relevant keyword patterns.

## **» USE EVEN MORE FREE KEYWORD DISCOVERY TOOLS**

Now it’s time to use some more sophisticated tools. We’ll start with the most powerful tool, Google’s own **Keyword Planner**. Note that you can only use Google’s official

Keyword Planner tool effectively if you have a **paid** Google Ads (AdWords) account and are actually spending money. So, although we'll first investigate how to use this tool, I will also point you to two alternative keyword tools: the Twinword Ideas keyword tool and Bing's Keyword Planner, which are more open to free users.

## Sign up for Google Ads

To use the Keyword Planner, you'll need to sign up for Google Ads (formerly known as AdWords) at <https://ads.google.com/>. You'll need a credit card to set up an account. I recommend doing your best to identify relevant keywords, create some ads, and allocate no more than \$300 / month for your ads. You just want to fund it with enough money so that *after a few months, it will fully share data with you*; then, you can deactivate your campaigns.

(You can even call Google Ads at 866-246-6453 and ask them for help on how to set up your advertising campaigns; just set a low budget, such as \$100 / month). If you're worried about credit card fraud, just go to your local grocery store and get a "gift card" with the VISA logo to set up your Google Ads account. I know it's a bit of a pain, but once you have an operational Google Ads account, you can use the Google Ads Keyword Planner to research SEO keywords. It's a worthwhile investment!

Now, let's return to the Keyword Planner. Here are the steps to access the tool:

1. Log in to your Google Ads account at <https://ads.google.com/>.
2. Find the "wrench" icon for "Tools and Settings" at the top right of the screen and click on it.
3. Click on "Keyword Planner" on the left.
4. Click on "Discover new keywords."
5. Enter a "core" or "starter" keyword such as "knee doctor."
6. Click "Get results."

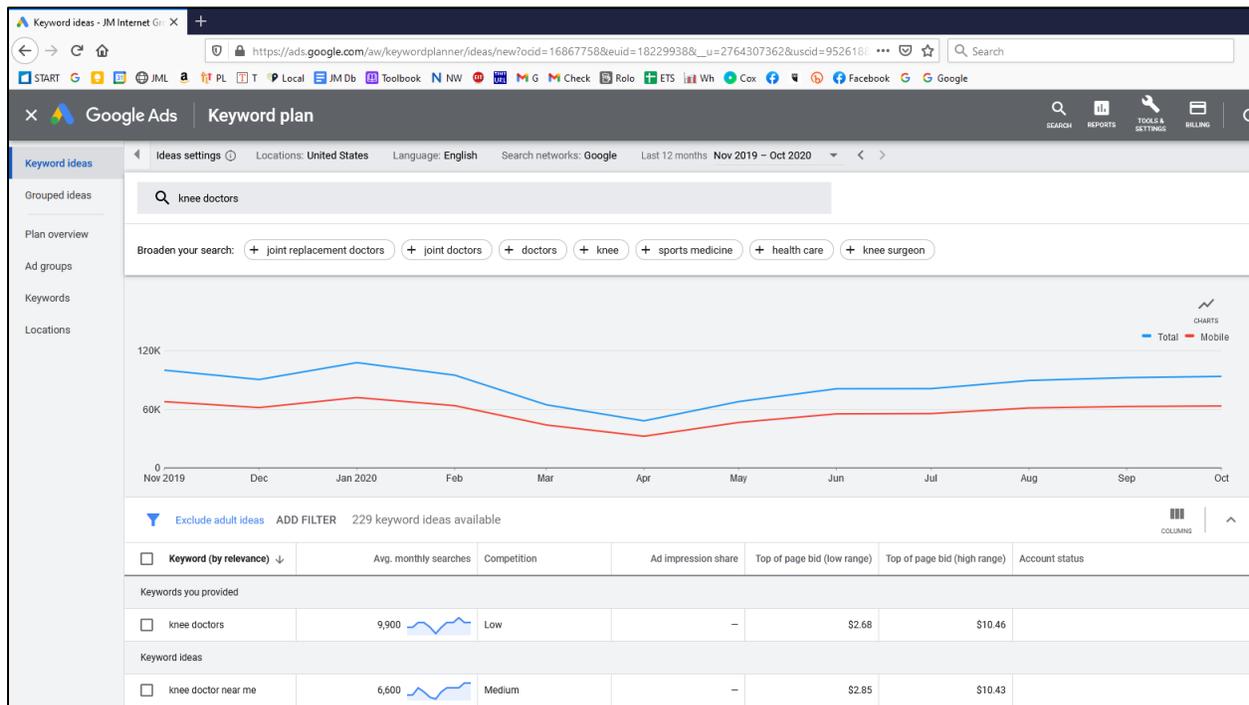
Once you have entered a "core keyword," the tool gives you a nice list of suggestions, including the "average monthly searches." As it is a far from perfect tool and we are

only brainstorming keywords, you can ignore everything except the far right column. Scan it to look for:

**Synonyms.** For example, “knee doctor” vs. “orthopedic surgeon” vs. “knee specialist”.

**Helper words.** For example, “best,” “top,” and “near me.”

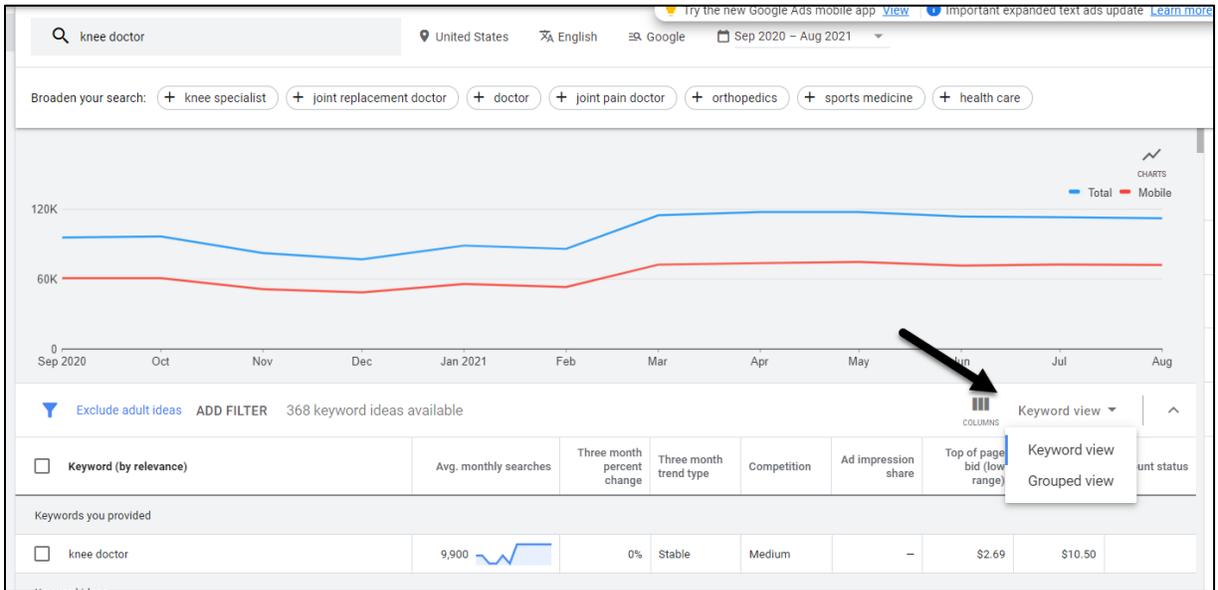
Here’s a screenshot for “knee doctors.”



The tool provides a wealth of synonyms, helpers, and other keyword patterns. Just browse around what’s returned, as it’s a bit messy. At this point, do not get fixated on “volume” or “top of page bid,” however. Look for synonyms first and foremost and then for helper words.

One good idea is to look at the suggestions under “Broaden your search” across the top. Here, for example, the tool gives us keyword synonyms for “knee doctor,” such as “joint replacement doctors” or “knee surgeons.”

Another good idea is to click on “Grouped view” on the right side under “Keyword view.” It’s a little hard to find, so here’s a screenshot:



Google will generate “groups” or interrelated keyword themes – all great ideas for your own keyword research. Google AI works hard to learn what keywords are related to what other words, and you can leverage this information for your own SEO project.

Here’s a screenshot showing how the seed keyword “knee doctor” provides some interesting “grouped ideas”:

<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Group (by relevance)</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <span>Specialist Orthopedic (10)</span> orthopedic knee specialist near me, orthopedic knee speci...
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <span>Knee Revision (6)</span> best knee revision surgeons, best knee revision surgeons n...
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <span>Pain Specialist (5)</span> knee pain specialist near me, knee pain doctor specialist, k...
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <span>My Area (6)</span> knee doctors in my area, knee specialist in my area, knee s...
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <span>Surgery Doctors (9)</span> knee surgery doctor, best doctors for knee replacement sur...
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <span>Hss Knee (5)</span> hss knee surgeons, best knee replacement surgeon at hss, ...

This “grouped view” feature in the Keyword Planner is the best tool I know of for identifying **synonyms**. As we see here, we go from “knee doctor” to “orthopedic knee specialist” to “knee surgeons,” etc. These become important for your SEO strategy as you build out or optimize your website.

As you brainstorm, keep in mind the distinctions among keyword types as well:

**Educational or early-stage keywords.** These are words like “knee replacement” or “knee surgery,” in which the searcher is just beginning to learn about the topic and is not necessarily close to a buy decision or engagement.

**Transactional keywords.** These are words like “knee specialists” or “knee doctors Boston” that indicate they’re close to a buy decision or engagement.

**Branded or reputational searches.** These are searches for individual companies or, in this case, doctors, and indicate searches just before an engagement. “Reviews” is a very common helper word.

I’ll return to these distinctions in a moment, but for now, just start to wrap your head around how a search for “knee pain” is an early-stage search query while a search for

“best knee doctors in St. Louis” is a late-stage search query, close to a buy or engagement decision. It is the latter keyword patterns that are most valuable for SEO.

## **Don't Miss Your Synonyms and Adjacent Terms!**

Notice how the tool gives you both *helper* words and *synonyms*. For example, you get *best* knee replacement, telling you that *best* is a helper word, and you get *doctor* as well as *surgeon*, *orthopedic* as well as *knee*. The tool is telling you how people search: some people search for *knee doctors*, and others for *orthopedic specialists*. Many people search for *best* knee surgeons (and on the contrary, few search for *worst* knee surgeons). Because to Google, *a word is just a word*; you want to be sure to capture ALL your key synonyms. A search for “best knee doctor in San Francisco” is different from a search for “best orthopedic surgeon in San Francisco,” even though the latter may include the former, i.e., many people searching for orthopedic surgeons who do knees. This is true across all domains; a *lawyer*, to Google, is not the same as an *attorney*. In summary, be sure to identify all your helpers and synonyms and write these down on your Keyword Brainstorm Worksheet.

## **Alternative Tools**

Google doesn't play nice with non-spenders, so if you are brand new to Google Ads and/or spending too little, you may not see all the data mentioned above, especially when it comes to volume and value data. Indeed, the volume and value (CPC or “Top of Page Bid / high range) data are a bit loose even if the tool is fully functional. To this end, here are a few other robust tools, some free and some paid, that provide volume and cost data often better than Google's and certainly in an easier-to-user format:

**Bing Webmaster Tools** > SEO > Keyword Research at <https://www.bing.com/webmasters>. You'll have to validate your website for Bing Webmaster Tools, but, once validated, you can access this free tool. Bing's volume is about 10% of Google's, so you can extrapolate from that to volume and, to a lesser extent, the cost-per-click data against keywords.

**TwinWord Ideas** at <http://jmlinks.com/48e>. This tool has both a free and paid version and provides good keyword discovery, volume, and value (CPC) data.

**AHrefs.com** at <https://ahrefs.com/>. This company provides a full suite of tools, including one of the very best keyword discovery and analysis tools. Pricing starts at \$99 / month, so you can sign up for one month, do your research, export your data, and cancel your account if necessary.

**MOZ** at <https://moz.com/>. MOZ is the industry leader in SEO tools (though I am an AHREF fan myself). Priced also at \$99 / month, MOZ provides a robust keyword tool, and again you can conceivably sign up for a month, do and export your research and then cancel your account if necessary.

Returning to keyword research, I'll assume you're either using the Google Keyword Tool or one of the competitors. You're seeing keywords, helpers, volumes, and values as measured in the CPC (cost per click) that advertisers are willing to pay for a keyword click on Google. What does this data tell us?

## » UNDERSTAND SOME KEYWORD THEORY

As you're drinking martinis or coffee, brainstorming with your teammates, using Google and other keyword tools, and doing search after search on Google, you want to wrap your head around the fact that you're playing a word game with Google. First and foremost, it's all about what are the search queries typed in by customers (or spoken by customers to their phones or Google devices). Visualize a buyer persona, grasp his pain point or desire, and research those search queries he'll type into Google.

**That's the key point of keyword research: getting a comprehensive yet laser-focused understanding of the keywords used by customers.**

Next, however, with all your keywords jotted down on a whiteboard, Google doc, or Word doc, it's time to begin to understand some keyword theory. Just as if you were playing Scrabble or Words with Friends, you'd want to know that the "x" is worth more than the "e" and that the word "xylophone" is worth more than the word "everyman," you need to understand that in SEO, not all keywords have the same value.

## Fish Where the Fish Are (for Yummy Fish)

To understand what this all means, let's use an analogy: **fishing** and **fish**. As the SEO technician, you're the **fisherman**, of course.

First, you want to "fish where the fish are." Let's review a screenshot from the Google Keyword Planner:

<input type="checkbox"/> Keyword (by relevance) ↓	Avg. monthly searches	Competition	Ad impression share	Top of page bid (low range)	Top of page bid (high range)
Keywords you provided					
<input type="checkbox"/> knee pain	201,000	Medium	–	\$0.25	\$4.20
<input type="checkbox"/> knee surgeon	14,800	Low	–	\$2.42	\$7.05
<input type="checkbox"/> knee doctors	9,900	Low	–	\$2.68	\$10.46
Keyword ideas					
<input type="checkbox"/> knee replacement	40,500	Medium	–	\$1.46	\$5.00
<input type="checkbox"/> runners knee	33,100	Low	–	\$0.60	\$2.23

The tool indicates that there are 201,000 searches for "knee pain" in a given month in the United States vs. only 9,900 for "knee doctors." This is called **volume**. In our fish analogy, this would be "how many" fish are in the lake. Generally speaking, you want to optimize on keywords that have a fair amount of volume, just as if you are a fisherman, you want to "fish where the fish are."

But in fishing, as in SEO, it's not just about **volume**; it's also about **value**. Take a look at the "Top of page bid" column, and you'll see that while advertisers are willing to pay just \$4.20 for a click from Google to their website for "knee pain," they'll pay double or \$10.46 for a click on "knee doctor" and \$7.05 for a click on "knee surgeon." Advertisers, like buyers in a fish market, are competing against each other to "catch"

customers. They bid “up” the price of keywords that make them money and bid “down” the keywords that do not, just as people in a fish auction bid “up” the price of yummy fish and bid down the price of not-so-yummy fish.

Wild salmon, for example, might be \$29.99 a pound, while farmed tilapia is only \$2.99. “Knee doctor” is \$10.46 a click, while “Knee pain” is only \$4.20.

**The *higher* the cost-per-click, the more *lucrative* the term.**

**Value**, as shown in the Google Keyword Planner, is thus the crowd’s opinion of how likely a given keyword is to end in a sale and how valuable that sale is.

As you research your keywords, therefore, try to identify those keywords that are high **value** vs. those that are high **volume**. You’ll also see there’s a trade-off, just as in the fish market. Generally, the higher the volume, the lower the value, and vice-versa. The trick is to look for the “sweet spot,” keywords that have both a sufficient volume to be worth your effort and a sufficient value to end in a profitable sale.

### **Secret Fishing Holes are Best**

In fact, you’re looking for “secret fishing holes.” If you find keywords that have decent volume and are high value TO YOU, meaning they are likely to convert to sales or sales leads FOR YOU but have not been “discovered,” these are very good keywords! This means a keyword that is “nichey,” that gets at exactly what you have to offer and yet isn’t so discovered by the crowd that the price (and competition in SEO) hasn’t yet been bid up.

For example, there are many hypnotherapists. Most focus on weight loss, anxiety, and smoking cessation. But suppose you use Ericksonian hypnosis, which is a special kind of hypnosis based on indirect and metaphoric suggestions. People who know something about hypnosis may be drawn to this methodology and might search for:

*Boston Ericksonian hypnotherapists*

This “nichey” keyword isn’t completely discovered. It’s a “secret fishing hole” that very tightly matches what you have that they want. It will be easier to rank for, and you’ll more easily convert people who click from Google to your website.

*Riches are in the niches.*

*Be on the lookout for “secret fishing holes.”*

To use a different example, a knee surgeon who specializes in knee surgery for athletes or arthroscopic knee surgery, for instance, may have found a highly specialized and lucrative niche. It’s not all about volume, after all. It’s about value. And it’s not all about value *to the crowd*; it’s about the value *to you as a business*, meaning which searches truly indicate a person who is very hot for your product or service and very likely to buy.

Back to our fishing examples:

The worst thing to do is to fish where there aren’t any fish.

The next worst thing to do is to fish for low-quality fish that aren’t good to eat.

The next worst thing to do is to fish where all the other fisherfolk are competing against you.

The smartest and most wonderful thing to do is to discover a “secret fishing hole” and keep it secret.

### **More on Educational vs. Transactional Keywords**

Another way to look at this issue is to focus on keywords that are *early* in the sales ladder, those that usually occur when a person is just learning, just educating himself about an issue, and not likely to buy something. These are called **educational keywords** and generally have low cost-per-click in Google Ads. Keywords that occur

*late* in the sales ladder are when they are looking to buy something or make an engagement. These are called **transactional keywords** and generally have high cost-per-click in Google Ads. In general, you want to optimize for transactional keywords as they are “where the money is.”

**VIDEO.** Watch a quick video tutorial on distinguishing educational vs. transactional keywords, volume vs. value at <http://jmlinks.com/18k>.

You’re **best SEO** occurs at focused, transactional keywords, not educational keywords. You’re looking for the “sweet spot” between volume and value, education, and transaction.

Let me emphasize this:

**Identify and optimize for transactional, late-stage, high-value keywords.**

*I, Jason McDonald, do not want to be at the top of Google for “SEO.” But I do want to be at the top of Google for “SEO Expert San Francisco.” Why? Because the former is an early-stage, low-value educational search, while the latter is a late-stage, high-value transactional search: someone who wants to hire me as a high-paid consultant.*

*A knee surgeon wants to be at the top of Google for “San Francisco Knee Surgeons” and not for “knee pain” because the former are potential patients looking for knee surgery, and the latter could be practically anyone with a sore knee and just needing an aspirin.*

That said, you still need to rely on your instinct to determine your best keywords and then bolster that with real data from your Google Analytics, which we discuss in the last Chapter. The Keyword Planner is only a tool, and the art of SEO still means a lot of head-scratching to identify those keywords that are not just high volume but also high value.

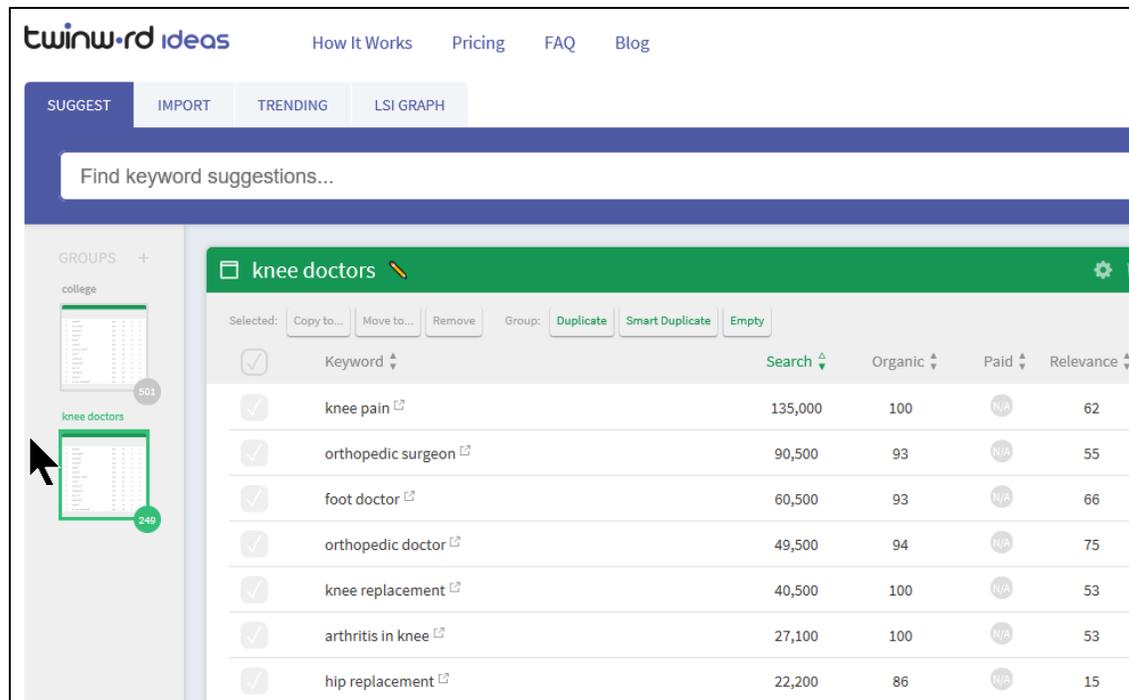
## Micro Search Queries

“Niche” keywords aren’t just long tail (multiword), either. A Los Angeles watch repair shop focusing on high-end watch repair might optimize for “Watch Repair Los Angeles” (lots of *volume*, but low in *value* as it may be people who just need a battery or have a Timex they want to be repaired). But a little research will identify brand-oriented searches such as “Rolex Repair LA,” “Breitling Repair Los Angeles,” or “Tag Heuer Repair LA.” People who know their brand and are looking for an expert in repairing that brand are likely to convert; watch repair “riches” are in the “niches” of brand-oriented search queries.

## Alternatives to the Keyword Planner

As I’ve indicated, Google now requires that you spend money to get accurate data out of the Keyword Planner. Accordingly, my recommendation is to allocate a hundred dollars per month to Google AdWords and run some actual ads for your keywords for three months. For less than \$300 or so, you’ll then be able to use the Keyword Planner for keyword discovery, and Google Ads gives you the absolute best data about actual search queries. (Once you’ve done your research, you can turn off your Google Ads campaigns).

If you don’t have a few hundred dollars to pay Google for AdWords, then I recommend you use one (or both) of the following free keyword tools: Bing Webmaster Tools’ Keyword Tool (<http://jmlinks.com/19g>) or the Twinword Ideas tool (<http://jmlinks.com/47a>). Here’s a screenshot from the Twinword Ideas tool for “knee doctors”:



Like the Keyword Planner, this tool gives you keyword ideas, helpers, volumes, and value. Paid tools such as AHREFS.com or MOZ.com tools also have robust functionality. For a little money, whether spent on Google Ads or on a paid tool, you can get access to keyword synonyms, helpers, volumes, and value as measured by the CPC (Cost per click) advertisers are willing to pay.

### Get ALL Your Keyword Ideas Down on Paper

For your final **TO-DO**, open up your “keyword brainstorm worksheet” and jot down keyword volumes and the CPC values of relevant keywords. Again, don’t worry about being organized. Just indicate – in general – which keywords are higher volume vs. higher value, which ones are educational vs. transactional. It won’t be a perfect map, but you will start to see patterns as to volume and value.

## »» CHECKLIST: KEYWORD ACTION ITEMS

Test your knowledge of keywords! Take the *keyword quiz* at <http://jmlinks.com/qzkb>. Next, here are your keyword **Action Items**:

- Hold a **keyword brainstorming session** with your team, and write down your “starter keywords” based on your knowledge of what potential customers type into Google.
- Use **Google autocomplete**, **UberSuggest**, **Answer the Public**, and Google’s **related searches** to build out your keyword list based on your “starter keywords.”
- Identify **competitors** who rank for Google on your keywords, visit their websites, view their HTML source code, and use their TITLE, META DESCRIPTION, and KEYWORDS tags to help you identify the complete universe of keywords relevant to your business.
- Use the **Google Ads Keyword Planner** or **alternative free or paid Keyword Tools** to look for ideas, volumes, and values as you build out your keyword list.
  - Begin to **organize keywords into logical groups** with core keywords and helper keywords, with an eye to their **volume** vs. **value** data.
  - Be on the lookout for “**niche**” or “**micro**” keywords that indicate high-value search queries by customers who are late in the sales ladder and likely to make a purchase. “Riches are in the niches.”

Check out the **free tools**! Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Keywords* for my favorite free tools for keyword discovery. Just visit <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>.

## »» DELIVERABLE: A COMPLETED KEYWORD BRAINSTORM WORKSHEET

Now we’ve come to the end of Step 2.1, and you should have the Chapter **DELIVERABLE** ready: your completed **keyword brainstorm worksheet**.

Remember the “Keyword Brainstorm” document will be messy. Its purpose is to get all relevant keywords, helper words, and keyword ideas about volume and value down on paper. In Step 2.2, we will turn to **organizing** our keywords into a structured **keyword worksheet**.





**YOUR SAMPLE TEXT**  
**YOUR SAMPLE TEXT YOUR SAMPLE TEXT YOUR SAMPLE TEXT**

## 2.2

# KEYWORD WORKSHEET

Now that you have a keyword **brainstorm document**, it's time to get organized! Step #2.2 is all about taking your *disorganized* list of keywords and turning them into an *organized*, structured **keyword worksheet** that reflects your **keyword groups** as well as keyword **volume** and **value**. You'll use your keyword worksheet as your "SEO blueprint" for many tasks, such as measuring your rank on Google, structuring your website to tell Google which keywords matter to you, writing better blog posts, and so on. In my method of doing SEO, I emphasize that it is absolutely essential that your company create and use a keyword worksheet to guide your SEO efforts.

Do not skip this step!

The **DELIVERABLES** for Step 2.2 are your **keyword worksheet** as well as a **rank measurement / baseline** of where your website ranks for target keywords searches on Google.

**Let's get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Identify Your Main Keyword Groups
- » Create Your Keyword Worksheet
- »» Deliverable: Your Keyword Worksheet
- » Measure Your Google Rank vs. Keywords
- »» Deliverable: Rank Measurement and a Baseline Score
- »» Checklist: Keyword Worksheet Action Items

## » IDENTIFY YOUR MAIN KEYWORD GROUPS

After you complete your keyword brainstorm worksheet, your head may be spinning (*especially if you and your team were drinking martinis rather than coffee as the elixir of choice during the brainstorm exercise*). Now it's time to shift gears and organize those keywords into “**keyword groups**” with an eye to both keyword volume and value.

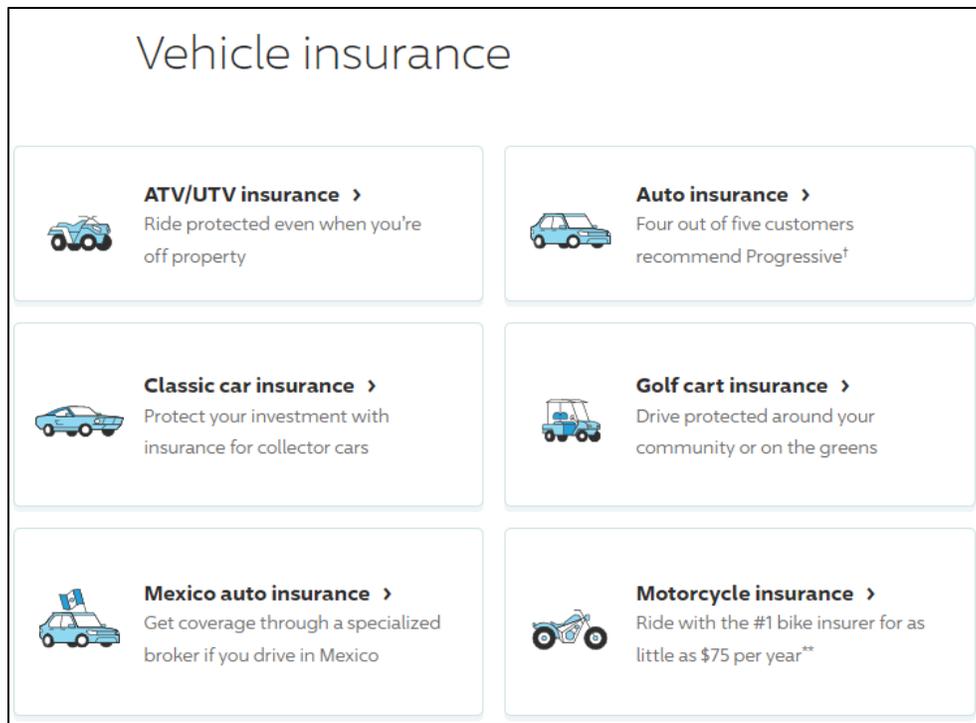
Here's where we're going:

*Brainstorm your keywords > organize them by **keyword group** into a keyword worksheet > measure your **rank** on Google / Bing for sample keywords > restructure your website to better “talk to Google” vis-à-vis your keyword patterns.*

Let's look at some example websites.

Most businesses have a few different product or service lines and often a few different customer segments. Take a look at Progressive Insurance (<https://www.progressive.com/>), for example, and you'll quickly realize that they have different types of insurance offered, such as auto insurance, motorcycle insurance, RV insurance, and even Segway insurance. Examine <https://www.progressive.com/insurance/> as well as <https://www.progressive.com/sitemap/> to see the organizational structure of their website, and you'll quickly realize that the “structure” of the website reflects the “structure” of how people search for insurance.

Here's a screenshot:



So in terms of **keyword groups** and **matching landing pages**, we have:

*motorcycle insurance* = a group of keywords around *motorcycle insurance* like *cheap motorcycle insurance*, *motorcycle insurance quote*, etc. = a landing page on the website at <https://www.progressive.com/motorcycle/>.

*ATV/UTV insurance* = a group of keywords around insurance for “All Terrain Vehicles” and a landing page at <https://www.progressive.com/atv/>.

*Golf Cart insurance* = a group of keywords around the insurance for those who drive golf carts, etc., and a landing page at <https://www.progressive.com/golf-cart/>.

etc.

Of course, the really high-volume search is for “car insurance” (“auto insurance”), and they have a specific landing page at <https://www.progressive.com/auto/>.

## Outline a Hierarchy of Your Keywords

If you think of keywords as living in “keyword groups” inside a **hierarchy**, you can actually sketch out a **structural hierarchy** to your website. If you worked at Progressive Insurance, for example, you’d have a hierarchy like this:

**Home Page:** introduce the major keyword themes of the website around “insurance,” and then:

> **Landing Page:** “Motorcycle Insurance”

> Informational / blog posts: additional pages on “motorcycle insurance” such as “unique motorcycle coverages,” etc.

> **Landing Page:** “Car Insurance”

> Informational / blog posts:” additional pages on “Classic car insurance” such as “comparing types of auto insurance coverage,” etc.

> **Landing Page:** “Segway Insurance”

> Informational / blog posts:” additional pages on “Segway insurance” such as “types of Segway coverage,” etc.

If you pay attention to the URL structure of the website, you can also see how the organization of the URLs follows the keyword groups:

<https://www.progressive.com/> - “homepage”

<https://www.progressive.com/auto/> - “auto insurance group”

<https://www.progressive.com/auto/discounts/snapshot/> - “subordinate page”

<https://www.progressive.com/auto/discounts/compare-car-insurance-rates/> - “subordinate page”

etc.

In other words, Progressive has conceptualized its keywords into a structured keyword worksheet that reflects “core” keywords and related “helper” keywords and phrases and then implemented a highly organized website hierarchy that literally reflects this structure.

*Your key to-do is to take your keywords and organize them into a **hierarchy** because Google (run by engineers) prefers websites that have a clear organization.*

Here’s a diagram of a very common and effective SEO-friendly, hierarchical **website structure** that reflects how people search:

## **Homepage**

### **Landing Page #1** (Core keyword #1)

Sub landing page #1a (Core keyword plus helper #1a)

Sub landing page #1b (Core keyword plus helper #1b)

### **Landing Page #2** (Core keyword #2)

Sub landing page #2a (Core keyword plus helper #2a)

Sub landing page #2b (Core keyword plus helper #2b)

## **Blog**

Blog post #1a (on a micro topic)

Blog post #1b (on a micro topic)

Of course, there will be other pages on your website that are “for humans,” but in terms of SEO optimization, you can’t really do better than a simple category- and subcategory-based hierarchy. In Chapter 3.2, we’ll return to this topic and discuss the need for a keyword footer, sitemap, and “link-sculpting” to connect all your pages together around your keyword themes. But for now, start to look at your keywords and organize them into categories and subcategories, as you might for *animals > mammals > rodents* and *animals > mammals > canines*, etc.

## SEO Silos

Bruce Clay, one of the gurus of the SEO industry, has coined the term “SEO Silos” to explain how keyword structure should determine website architecture. You can read an excellent article by Clay entitled “SEO Siloing: How to build a website silo architecture,” at <http://jmlinks.com/37u>.

# KEYWORD HIERARCHY = WEBSITE ORGANIZATION

Another example of a well-designed hierarchy is Industrial Fans Direct (<http://www.industrialfansdirect.com/>). Take a look at their website, and you’ll see that they have product categories such as blowers, man coolers, ceiling, bathroom fans, etc., and that these reflect the “needs” of consumers who “search Google” using words that reflect those needs.

*blowers* = a group of keywords around *blowers* = a landing page on the website at <https://www.industrialfansdirect.com/collections/blowers-and-blower-fans>.

*roof exhaust* = a group of keywords around *roof exhaust* = a landing page on the website at

<https://www.industrialfansdirect.com/collections/commercial-and-industrial-exhaust-fans/roof-exhaust-fans>.

etc.

As on Progressive.com, you see coherent URLs that reflect the keyword hierarchy:

<https://www.industrialfansdirect.com/>

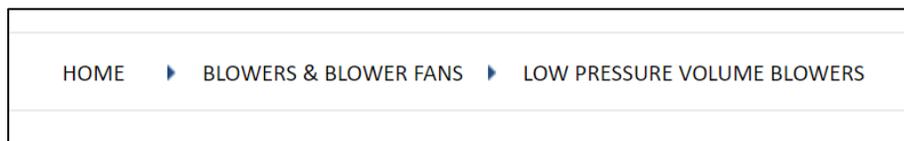
<https://www.industrialfansdirect.com/collections/blowers-and-blower-fans>

<https://www.industrialfansdirect.com/collections/blowers-and-blower-fans/low-pressure-volume-blowers>

<https://www.industrialfansdirect.com/collections/blowers-and-blower-fans/inflation-blowers>

etc.

If you look carefully at the top left quadrant of each web page, you'll also see that the subordinate pages have a “**breadcrumb trail**,” which is a hierarchical set of links up and down the categories. Here's a screenshot:



Again, if you were privy to their internal documentation, I am sure that we'd find a Keyword Worksheet that is guiding the structure of the website from the homepage to landing pages (“core keyword groups”) to sub-landing pages (subordinate keyword phrases).

If you're using WordPress, there are easy plugins that will create a hierarchical breadcrumb trail for your website. Just search for "breadcrumb trail" in the WordPress plugins page once you're logged into WordPress, or literally Google "WordPress breadcrumb plugins" to find a few.

## Organize Your Keywords into a Keyword Worksheet

With these examples of well-organized websites in mind, it's time to revisit your own keyword patterns and transform your *disorganized keyword brainstorm document* into an *organized keyword worksheet*. First, circle the "core keywords" that reflect your basic product or service categories. Usually, you'll see a one-to-one correspondence of a "product group" that matches a "core keyword," as you see in the examples above. These "core keywords" become your "keyword groups." Second, you'll also see a bunch of helper words like *cheap, best, San Francisco, quote, rate*, etc., that are often entered alongside the core keyword. Third, look for phrases that combine a "core keyword" with a "helper keyword" to make a phrase. These become the "subordinate keyword groups" in a child-to-parent relationship to the "keyword groups" above them.

Taking as our example Stamford Uniform & Linen at <https://www.stamfordlinen.com/>. This is a B2B linen service that supplies key industries such as restaurants, healthcare, and gyms with towels, uniforms, table cloths, and other "linens." Thus, if you look at their site architecture which mimics their keyword relationships, you see the following:

Core Keyword	Dependent Phrases
Linen Service at <a href="https://www.stamfordlinen.com/linen-service/">https://www.stamfordlinen.com/linen-service/</a> .	Content around the phrase "linen service" with mentions of key vertical markets such as restaurants, hospitals, dentists, etc., and key geo targets such as New York City or Stamford.

Commercial Laundry at <a href="https://www.stamfordlinen.com/commercial-laundry/">https://www.stamfordlinen.com/commercial-laundry/</a> .	Commercial laundry content including key geo targets.
Restaurant linen service at <a href="https://www.stamfordlinen.com/restaurant-linen/">https://www.stamfordlinen.com/restaurant-linen/</a> .	Content around “linen service” and the restaurant industry plus key geos such as New York City.
Nursing home linen service at <a href="https://www.stamfordlinen.com/nursing-home/">https://www.stamfordlinen.com/nursing-home/</a> .	Content around “linen service” and the nursing home industry plus key geos such as New York City.
etc.	Notice how there are landing pages for specific “core keywords” on the homepage, on the visible top navigation, and on the footer.

Remember: a “core keyword” is the minimum necessary to form a logical search, and it is often more than one word. So it’s:

*linen service* (not *linen* or *service* alone) (and *key verticals* on landing pages as in *restaurant linen service*)

*uniform rentals* (not *uniform* or *rentals* alone)

and even

*commercial mat rentals at <https://www.stamfordlinen.com/mat-rental-service/>* to represent the very high-value service of entrance and floor mats. This is a “low volume” but “high value” target phrase and so it gets its own landing page.

Throughout, there would be helpers such as *best, top, top-rated, Stamford, Greenwich, local, same-day*, etc. Notice how some of these are qualifiers (like best, top, top-

rated) and others are geographics (like Stamford, Greenwich, local, or near me). Many companies have this sort of pattern and end up with what I call “service line” landing pages (e.g., “linen service”), and geographic landing pages (e.g., “Stamford CT linen services”).

Remember: “don’t let reality confuse you!”

How so?

Well, though “commercial laundry” encompasses both “linen service” and “uniform rental,” there are unique landing pages for all three. And even though technically the company is not a “linen supply” but a “linen service,” we optimize for both. The searcher is never wrong, and in Google’s universe, “lawyer” is different from “attorney,” and “commercial laundry service” is different from “linen service” or “uniform rentals.” Even “SF” is different from “San Francisco,” just as “NYC” from “New York.”

*Words matter because you’re playing a word game, not a reality game.*

The point is that the core keywords are like the “parent” in a keyword “family,” so that “linen service” is the “parent” to the “children,” i.e., “restaurant linen service,” “dentist linen service,” and even “commercial mat service.” And, because this is a local business, we realize we need to “pepper and salt” the city names Stamford, Greenwich, New Canaan, Port Chester, NYC, Brooklyn, etc., throughout the content of the website. Why? Because people often search for “linen service” plus a city, as for example, “restaurant linen service in Brooklyn.”

Indeed, because **city searches** are incredibly important to this website, the website sports city-specific landing pages such as <https://www.stamfordlinen.com/Mamaroneck> in order to rank for searches such as “Mamaroneck linen services” on Google and Bing. (Note: do not overdo these “city” search pages, as technically speaking, they can be considered “doorway pages” (<http://jmlinks.com/37v>) by Google!)

In short, a keyword group isn't entirely driven by reality. It's driven by a group of interrelated keywords that you want to rank for, some of which exist in reality and some of which do not. It's about linguistic patterns, not reality, so put your linguistic thinking cap on as you outline your keyword worksheet.

## How Many Core Keywords do You Have?

People often mistakenly think that they have “hundreds” of keywords when in fact, they usually have only about five to ten **core keyword groups** or **structural patterns**, and these then form hundreds of possible keyword queries. As on *Progressive.com*, *IndustrialFans.com*, and *StamfordLinen.com*, as listed above, you'll see that a core keyword should become one, and only one, landing page on the website.

Let me repeat that:

**One *core keyword* will (ultimately) become one *landing page* on your website.**

Looking at keywords for SEO in terms of core keywords makes it easy to see that a company will usually have about five to ten *core keywords*, and about five to ten corresponding *landing pages* on the website. An eCommerce website might have many hundreds, but the same basic rule applies: one core keyword equals one landing page. (I explain landing pages in more detail in Chapters 3.1 and 3.2).

## Keyword Volume and Value

As for keyword *volume* and *value*, you'll then see that you take a core keyword, and you can look at the volume of the entire “cluster” of keywords around it, as well as the value as measured in Google's Keyword Planner or other keyword tools that reflects the “value” of these keywords in the sense that they are likely, or not, to end in a sale.

**Volume** = are there a lot, or just a few, searches on Google that reflect the core keyword and its dependent phrases?

**Value** = if a searcher enters any one of the search queries in the cluster, is it of high, or low value, to your company, as measured in the likelihood that it can become a sale, and if it becomes a sale that that sale makes you a lot (vs. a little) of money?

Essentially, any keyword that has sufficient volume AND sufficient value as to be a likely customer should become a landing page. You should create landing pages for:

**Core keywords.** These are keywords with sufficient volume and value.

**Micro / high value.** These are very nichey keywords that are of such high value as to be a likely sale and/or a high-value sale even if they do not have very high value.

**Long-tail / high value.** These are very nichey keywords that are of such high value as to be a likely sale and/or a high-value sale even if they do not have very high value.

Your blog posts will become long-tail keywords and other long-tail patterns (or micro patterns) that are odds and ends but not keywords that rise to the level of evergreen, high-value keywords. At this point in your SEO project, keep one eye looking forward to your website organization but realize that, for now, you're lumping together your keywords into core keywords, micro keywords, and long-tail keywords and placing them in a hierarchy on your keyword worksheet.

For your first **TO-DO**, download the **keyword worksheet**. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode "seo2023z" to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the "keyword worksheet." Note this is a Microsoft Excel document but can be converted to a Google spreadsheet.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on how to create a Keyword Worksheet at <http://jmlinks.com/17m>.

Inside the document, list each major pattern of your keywords (which reflect a product or service grouping of your company) on a line all by itself in the first column. Return to the Google AdWords Keyword Planner (or another keyword tool) and note both the keyword volume and keyword value (suggested bid) that correspond to each core keyword.

## » CREATE YOUR KEYWORD WORKSHEET

Now it's time to fill out your keyword worksheet in more detail. In your spreadsheet, you'll be filling out columns for the following:

**Core Keywords.** These are the minimum words necessary to create a relevant search. If you are a watch repair shop servicing high-end watches, for example, your core keywords would be phrases such as “watch repair,” “Tag Heuer Repair,” “Rolex Repair,” etc. This is the first column and reflects the core, structural keyword patterns and indicates volume and value.

**Note.** If to your business a phrase is important enough (e.g., *Rolex watch repair* vs. *Tag Heuer watch repair* vs. just *watch repair*), then break it out into its own core keyword group / line item on your keyword worksheet. Do this even if these words are closely related (e.g., Rolex repair vs. Hamilton repair vs. Tag Heuer repair for watches).

**Helper Keywords.** Common helpers are geographics like San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland. In the watch examples above, other helpers would be “best,” “authorized,” “NYC,” etc. that combine with the core keywords to make the actual search query (e.g., “Best watch repair NYC” or “authorized Rolex repair NYC”).

**Sample Search Query Phrases.** Take your core keywords plus your helpers and build out some “real” search queries that potential customers might use. Group

these by keyword family. For example, you'd have a keyword group called "Rolex Repair," and underneath, related keyword phrases such as "Rolex Repair NYC," "Authorized Rolex Repair Midtown," or "Best Rolex Repair Shop New York," etc.

**Search Volumes.** Indicate the volume of searches (where available) as obtained from the Google AdWords Keyword Planner.

**Search Value.** Indicate whether a given keyword family is of high, low, or negative value to you and your business. Does it indicate a searcher who is probably a target customer? If your answer is a strong yes, then this is a "high value" search term! Does it clearly indicate a non-customer? If so, this is a "low value" or even a "negative" search term. I often mark "hot," "warm," or "cold" next to a keyword group.

**Competitors.** As you do your searches, write down the URLs of competitors that you see come up in your Google searches. These will be useful as mentors that you can emulate as you build out your SEO strategy.

**Negative Keywords.** Are there any keywords that indicate someone is definitely not your customer? Common examples are *cheap* or *free*, as these are often indicative of people with little or no money or little or no intention to buy something. *(These negative keywords are not so important for SEO, but if you engage in AdWords, they will become very useful.)*

## Priority Order

Not all keywords are created equally. Some are **high volume** (*lots of searches*), and some are **high value** (*they are customers ready to buy something, or take an important action like filling out a feedback form, or calling with an inquiry*). With respect to your business, take a look at your keyword worksheet and think about which queries are a) the *most likely* to be a potential sale, b) the *most likely* to be a high-value sale, and c) the *least likely* to be ambiguous. (An ambiguous or problematic keyword is one that has several meanings that might cross business products or services and is, therefore, more difficult to optimize on than an unambiguous keyword. Compare *fan*, for example, which could be a *hand fan*, an enthusiast for a *sports team*, or an *electrical appliance to blow air* with *insurance* which refers to one, and only one, type of product.)

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on educational vs. transactional, volume vs. value keyword theory at <http://jmlinks.com/17n>.

### **Prioritize Your Keywords: Hot, Warm, or Cold?**

Prioritize your keyword families on the spreadsheet from TOP to BOTTOM with the highest priority keywords at the top, and the lowest at the bottom.

Remember the *volume* vs. *value* trade-off. “Transactional” keywords (those close to a sale) tend to have higher *value*, but lower *volume*; whereas “educational” keywords (those early in the research process) tend to have lower *value*, but higher *volume*.

However, here’s the rub: because of the see-saw between value and volume, there is no hard and fast rule as to what should be your top priority. It can’t be just *volume*, and it can’t just be *value*.

In fact, I recommend you use a column on the far left and call it “hot / warm / cold.” Sit down with the CEO or sales staff, and play a “hot / warm / cold” game by asking IF a customer entered such-and-such into Google, would it be hot (*definitely our customer*), warm (*probably our customer*), or cold (*not our customer*)?

Prioritize the “hot” keywords at the top of the Keyword Worksheet and the “warm” keywords towards the bottom. I often throw out the “cold” keywords entirely. This will help you see the complexity of keyword patterns as some keywords will be “easy” to categorize as hot / warm / cold and others might be more challenging – perhaps they have a lot of volume, but are ambiguous, or perhaps they are high value but just so little volume, or the customers don’t know to search for them.

*The art of SEO is targeting the keywords most likely to generate high ROI, which is a function of BOTH volume and value.*

## Competitive Level

Another tricky attribute is **competition**. As you research your keywords, pay attention to the competitive level. You can guess that a keyword is competitive (many vendors want to “get the click”) based on:

- The **suggested bid** in the Keyword Planner or other Keyword tool: the *higher* the suggested bid, the *more competitive* a keyword.
- The **number of ads** shown for related search queries: the *more* ads you see, the *more competitive* a keyword.
- The *more* you see the **keyword phrase in the ads**: the *more* competitors have “discovered” a high-value keyword phrase, the more likely they are to include it in their ad headlines, and the *more competitive* the keyword is.

Remember, you can use the Google AdWords Keyword Planner or another Keyword Tool to gauge the competitive level as measured by volume and cost-per-click. If you are using the Keyword Planner, be sure to click on the *Columns icon > Modify Columns* and enable the following fields:

Avg. monthly searches, which tells you the **volume**.

Top of page bid (high range), which tells you the CPC (Cost per click) or **value**

**Competition**, which tells you whether Google thinks it’s high or low

Here’s a screenshot showing the competitive level for “knee pain” and related terms:

<input type="checkbox"/> Keyword (by relevance) ↓	Avg. monthly searches	Competition
Keywords you provided		
<input type="checkbox"/> knee pain	201,000 	Medium
<input type="checkbox"/> knee surgeon	14,800 	Low
<input type="checkbox"/> knee doctors	9,900 	Low

The curious thing here is that it doesn't seem to correlate with value. The higher volume word ("knee pain") has a lower competitive level than the higher value word ("knee surgeon"). I find that often this is just misleading, but sometimes it helps to identify "secret fishing holes." Take the "competitive level" as indicated in the Keyword Planner

Here's the bottom line. If you were a New York City knee surgeon building out his keyword worksheet, you'd want to prioritize "knee surgeon" and "knee specialist" over "knee pain," yet realize that the competitive level is higher for these terms. Work with the tools, ask your team for "hot," "warm," and "cold," and use your best guess as you build out the structure of your core keywords (which will become your key landing pages on the actual website). There is no "right" or "wrong" answer here; this is the "art" of SEO.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial about how to gauge the competitive level at <http://jmlinks.com/17q>.

## Search Patterns

For now, let's return to the structural patterns or keyword groups. It is very important to conceptualize the way that people search, i.e., the mindsets by which they approach your business. Let's take the example of the **Sally Morin Law Firm**, a personal injury law firm in San Francisco at <https://www.sallymorinlaw.com/>.

Notice how the organization of the website follows the logical keyword hierarchy for a personal injury law firm in San Francisco:

**Personal Injury.** This, in combination with terms such as “lawyer,” “attorney,” or “law firm,” and geographics like “SF” or “San Francisco,” is the umbrella term for what they do. Note how the Homepage has that phrase high in the visible text and in the TITLE tag.

**Specific Injury Searches.** These are searches by people who have a specific legal need, such as they’ve been in a car accident or have suffered from medical malpractice. Note the landing page for “car accident lawyer” at <https://www.sallymorinlaw.com/practice-areas/car-accidents/>. Take a look at that page and pay special attention to the content, how it has both “lawyer” and “attorney,” both “California” and “San Francisco,” and so on and so forth. Someone thought through the synonyms and helper terms and placed these into the content on the page. It’s no accident (pardon the pun)!

**Micro or Long Tail Searches.** These are searches for super-specific types of legal needs, such as “Uber accident attorney” at <https://www.sallymorinlaw.com/uber-accidents/>. These are not flagship, high *volume* searches but are micro or long-tail searches that are high *value*. Someone who’s fighting an insurance company over an accident with Uber or Lyft will be overjoyed to find a lawyer that specializes in this, and hence the conversion rate will be high.

**Trending, Micro, or Long Tail Searches.** Take a look at the law firm’s lively blog at <https://www.sallymorinlaw.com/blog/>. The lawyers blog on topics that are trending or fit within their matrix of keywords. For example, there’s a blog post entitled, “\$100,000 Policy Limits Settlement for Runner Hit by Car in San Francisco,” which obviously targets folks who have been running and hit by a car in San Francisco. How’s that for a laser-focused search?

**Geotargeted Searches.** This is a Bay Area law firm, so notice how they’ve built out landing pages specific to key cities. There’s a landing page specific to Oakland for instance, at <https://www.sallymorinlaw.com/cities-we-serve/oakland/>. They know folks search for “Oakland personal injury lawyers,” and their website structure reflects this keyword organization.

**Branded or Reputational Searches.** Your brand image is very important to the success of your marketing. You want to monitor your online reputation by ranking highly for your branded or reputational searches, populating the Internet with positive information, and crowding out any negative information about your company. These are important for your keyword worksheet. A branded search, for example, is *Sally Morin lawyer* or *Sally Morin Law Firm Reviews*, which you can check out by doing those searches on Google at <http://jmlinks.com/51k>. Obviously, the law firm is working hard on its online reviews and reputation!

We'll get into website organization in Chapter 3.2, but for now, you can use the Sally Morin law firm website as a good mental map against your own keyword patterns. It's a well-organized hierarchy of keywords, and it reflects a keyword worksheet or blueprint that was used behind the scenes in the SEO optimization of the site.

In sum, the **keyword worksheet** for your company should reflect keyword *volume*, *value* (as measured by the “fit” between the keyword search and what your company has to offer), and the *structural search patterns* that reflect the “mindset” by which people search.

**VIDEO.** Watch a quick video tutorial on building a keyword worksheet at <http://jmlinks.com/17m>.

## » **DELIVERABLE: YOUR KEYWORD WORKSHEET**

After some brainstorming, hard work, and organization, and perhaps a hangover after all the martinis you drank, you should have your first **DELIVERABLE** ready: a completed **keyword worksheet** in an Excel or Google spreadsheet. The first “dashboard” tab should be a high-level overview to relevant keywords, reflecting the structural search patterns that generate the **keyword groups**, next the keyword volumes as measured by the Google Keyword Planner or other keyword tool, and finally the values measured by the Google cost-per-click data and your own judgment as to which search queries are most likely to lead to a sale or sales lead. Other tabs (which you will fill out over

time) include a tab for reporting, a tab to measure your rank on Google vs. keywords, a tab for local search rank, and a tab for landing pages.

Your keyword worksheet is your blueprint for successful SEO, but don't think of it as a static document! Rather, think of your keyword worksheet as an evolving "work in progress." There is as much art as science in SEO, and in many cases, formal tools like the Keyword Planner only get you so far.

## **The Art of SEO: SEO and Cooking**

Gut instinct as to how your customers search, especially which searches are likely to be close to a sale, is just as valuable as quantitative research! In fact, rather than think of SEO as a science, I strongly recommend you use other analogies. For example, I like to think of **SEO like the art of cooking**: it has *technical elements* for sure, but it also has *inspiration* and a *je ne sais quoi* of tricks and techniques that you just have to "do" rather than "learn."

In fact, at my Stanford Continuing Studies class, I often have students watch a fun video on Julia Child and then compare the art of SEO to the art of French cooking.

**VIDEO.** Watch a quick video tutorial on how SEO is more like cooking than science at <http://www.jmlinks.com/5q>. Get motivated!

As Julia teaches us, you cannot learn to cook by only reading cookbooks and philosophizing about cooking; you have to break some eggs and make an omelet. Indeed, truly good cooks aren't just technical robots; they have a passion for their patrons and an instinct about what makes good food, great.

*SEO – like cooking – is an endeavor that has both technical and artistic elements.*

The point here is that although you should spend time researching the volume, value, and competitive levels of your target keywords, ultimately, you'll see somewhere between five and ten keyword structural patterns. At that point, it's "good enough," and you're ready to start building out SEO-friendly content for your website. *Good cooks, cook, and good SEO's, do SEO.*

## » MEASURE YOUR GOOGLE RANK VS. KEYWORDS

I'm sure you're eager to start optimizing your website now that you've built out your keyword worksheet. We'll start that process in the next Chapter. Let me advise you, however, to take a moment and begin to measure some **baseline metrics** for your website. Why? Because you want to establish a baseline of your rank on Google at the beginning before you optimize. This will help you chart your progress, stay motivated, and have a record to show to your pesky boss when she barges in six months from now and says that "SEO is stupid" and you haven't made any progress.

### Install Google Analytics

I highly recommend that, if you haven't already done so, you install Google Analytics (<https://analytics.google.com/>) on your website, if possible via Google Tag Manager (<http://jmlinks.com/54j>). New for 2023, be sure to install both the traditional "UA" version of Google Analytics (which will sunset in summer 2023), and the new "GA4" version. Just make sure that the tracking code is on your website and pulling data. We'll discuss Google Analytics in detail in Chapter 6.1. But for now, just get it installed on your website so that it's recording user behavior.

### Measure Your Rank vs. Your Target Keywords

Returning to your rank measurements, Google rank refers to whether your website is on the first page Google returns for a search query. In the industry, it's called *SERP rank* for "search engine results page rank." Counting the organic results only, there are positions 1, 2, and 3 (the "Olympic" positions) and then positions four through ten ("page one" positions). Anything beyond position ten is not good. (*Note that because of*

*localization, there is also your rank on the local “snack pack” of three local results originating as Google reviews - more on this below.)*

You want to measure your website rank vis-à-vis your target keyword phrases, whether you are on page one (< 11) or in the “golden” positions of 1, 2, or 3.

## **Why Rank Matters**

Why do we care about our Google rank? First of all, the Olympic positions (1, 2, and 3) capture the lion’s share of clicks; by many estimates, over 60%! Second, being on page one (top ten results) means you are at least “in the game.” But third, as good SEO experts, we want to measure our rank before, during, and after our SEO efforts to measure our progress and return on investment (ROI). We can also feed this data back into our strategy so that we can then focus our content and link efforts (e.g., blog posts, product pages, press releases, link building) on searches where we are *beyond* page one vs. creating new content for searches for which we are *already* in top positions. Indeed, if you are spending money on Google AdWords advertising, you can use your rank for the organic results to optimize your spending; minimizing your spend on words for which you show “for free” and increasing your spend on keywords for which you do not rank well.

In short, measuring Google rank makes us work **smarter**, not **harder**!

## **Measure Your Rank Manually**

With your keyword queries in hand, as built out from your **keyword worksheet**, you can measure your rank manually by simply entering your target search queries and counting your position on the first page. Be sure to be “signed out” of your Google account or use “incognito mode” (<http://jmlinks.com/18p>) as Google customizes search results. You want to see your true rank on Google searches, not your personalized rank. Here are your steps:

1. Open up a web browser such as Google Chrome or Firefox in “incognito” or “private window” mode.

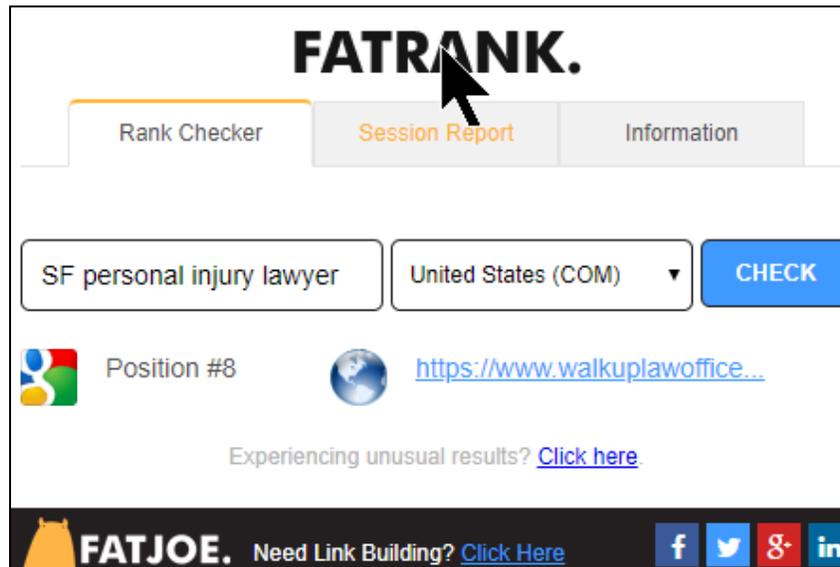
2. Go to Google.com.
3. Input a keyword phrase from your keyword worksheet.
4. Find your website, counting down from the top of the organic results.
  - a. If you appear on page one, note your rank as in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 up to 10. Be sure to count only the organic results, ignoring a) the ads on Google, and b) the local “snack pack” results which can be visible in a box of three on local searches such as “Sushi” or “probate lawyer,” etc.
    - i. If applicable, record the “Local Pack” rank separately as A (#1), B (#2) or C (#3).
  - b. If you do NOT appear on page one, note your rank as NP (not present) as it doesn’t really matter if you are position 11 or position 110 as few people go beyond page one.
5. Record your rank on your keyword worksheet, on the rank tab.
6. Repeat for other keywords on your keyword list.

Usually, a company will have between five and ten core keyword patterns and between fifty and one hundred variations of keyword phrases built by combining the core keywords and helper words. Don’t get discouraged if your rank is poor when you begin an SEO project. Be positive: the only way you have to go is up!

## Measure Your Rank Using Tools

While it’s getting harder and harder to use free tools to measure your rank on Google because Google doesn’t like to share this data with external companies, there remain a few free tools that allow you to input keywords and check your rank on Google. One of the best is the FATRANK plugin for Chrome (<http://jmlinks.com/25w>). After you’ve installed the plugin, here are your steps:

1. Visit the website you want to check rank for (i.e., your own website or that of a competitor).
2. Click on the FATRANK icon at the top right of Chrome, which looks like an orange Pokémon.
3. Enter a keyword and click the blue “check” icon. Here’s a screenshot:



You can do this for multiple keywords. Then click on “Session Report,” and it will give you a nice list of your keywords and rank, which you can export into a CSV file. Another good free tool is SerpSurf.com at <http://jmlinks.com/38w>.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video on how to measure your rank using FAT Rank as well as the Google AdWords Preview tool at <http://jmlinks.com/18h>.

Because rank checking is an important metric, I recommend you graduate to a paid tool such as Whitespark.ca, AHrefs.com, or MOZ.com. These tools allow you to upload a list of tens or even hundreds of keywords and check your rank on Google and Bing, as well as the “local pack” if you are a local business.

### **Record Your Keyword Rank Data**

I recommend recording your keyword rank on at least a monthly basis and inputting this into your keyword worksheet on the rank tab. This will give you a baseline before, during, and after you start your SEO project.

On an ongoing basis, use the resulting rank data to identify “strengths” (places where you appear in the top three or top ten) and “weaknesses” (keywords for which you appear beyond page one or not at all). Having identified your keyword rank weaknesses, you now know where to target your SEO efforts!

## Measure Local Search Results Manually

As you check rank, be sensitive to the fact that the free tools generally measure only your organic rank on a non-localized basis. Google “localizes” search results, especially short-tail phrases. Searchers in different cities see different results. For example, a search for “probate attorney” in Dallas will return *Dallas probate attorneys*, whereas the same search in San Francisco will return *San Francisco probate attorneys* even though the searcher does NOT enter the city.

This happens with many “short tail” searches that have a local character, such as *attorney, CPA, accountant, pizza, sushi, massage therapist, marriage counselor*, etc. – any search terms that generally indicate someone is looking for a local small business.

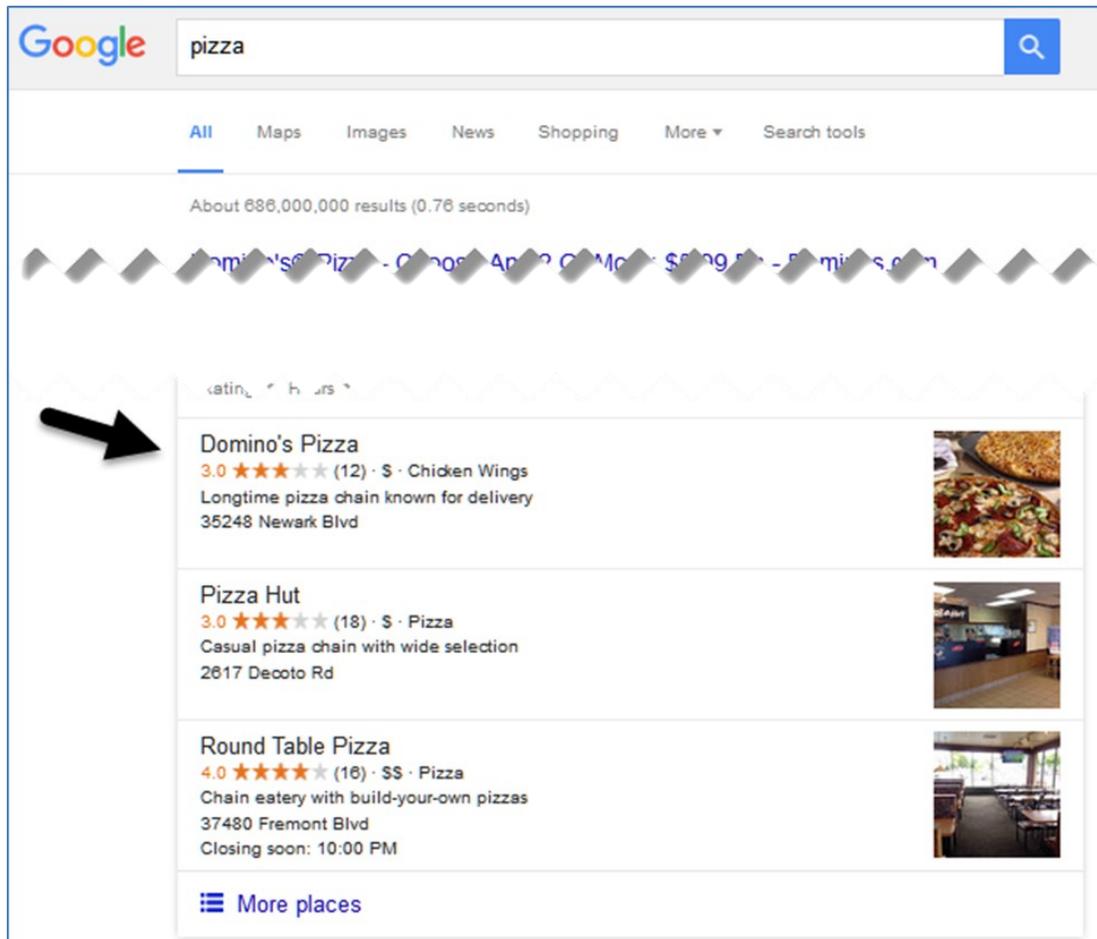
The free Rank Checker tools listed above, unfortunately, do **NOT** calculate your rank in a localized fashion. Therefore, if **local search rankings** are important to you, you need to **manually** check your rank on Google+ local, as shown in the “snack pack,” usually consisting of three results on Google.

To check your **local rank** (varying your position city-by-city), use the Google AdWords Preview Tool located in *Google Ads > Tools > Ad Preview and Diagnosis Tool*. Ignore that the tool will say, “Your ad is not showing,” but then switch your location city-by-city (even zip code by zip code) and check your rank manually. It can also be accessed without a Google Ads account at <http://jmlinks.com/54g>. You can vary location by city and even zip code, so it’s great for looking at your rank vs. various keywords in a local market.

Alternatively, use the free BrightLocal local search tool at <http://jmlinks.com/54k>. Both of these are useful if you are a local business and your rank on Google will vary based on the search location.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video on how to measure your local rank using the Google AdWords Preview tool at <http://jmlinks.com/17s>.

Here's a screenshot showing the search for "Pizza" and the "snack pack" of three local results with the location of Fremont, California:



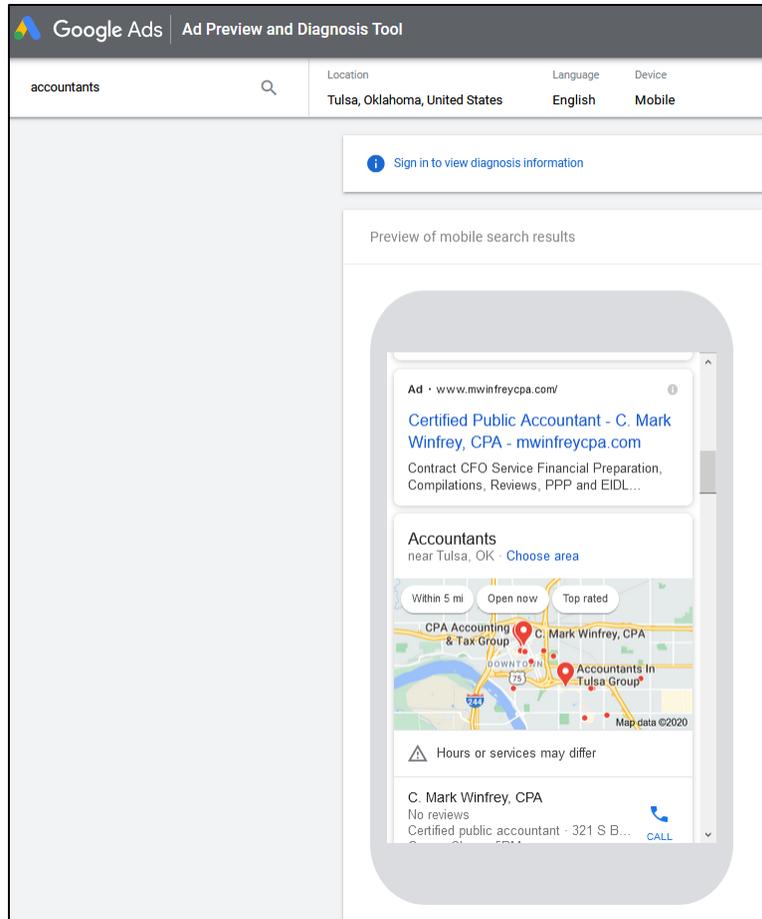
In this example, therefore, you'd record position #1 (A) for Domino's, #2 (B) for Pizza Hut, and #3 (C) for Round Table Pizza. Positions greater than #3 appear on the "second page" of local results (on both the phone and the desktop) and are worth considerably less than positions #1, #2, and #3. (Note: it has become an industry-standard practice to record local rank in the "snack pack" as A / B / C, not 1 / 2 / 3).

For your own company, identify short-tail local searches and record these on your keyword worksheet on the “local rank” tab. A “short tail” search would be something like “dog trainer” vs. a “long tail” with a geo search, which would be something like “dog trainer Salem Massachusetts.” The “short tails” Google ranks vary based on location, so that you need to use a tool to “spoof” your location to Google (i.e., I am in Fremont, California, but I spoof Google to believe that I am searching from Salem, Massachusetts).

### **Measuring Your Rank in Different Cities**

Let’s say you want to look at your locations in multiple cities, such as San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland. You cannot do this directly in Google; you have to use the Google Ads preview tool, which you can get to directly in Google Ads by logging in, and on the top menu, selecting the “Wrench icon” and then “Ad Preview and Diagnosis.” Alternatively, you can access the preview tool directly at this URL <http://jmlinks.com/54g>.

Here’s a screenshot of the tool with location set to Tulsa, Oklahoma, device set to “mobile,” and search term set to *accountants*:



The tool thus allows you to browse the Internet “as if” you were in a city or zip code and then see your rank on ads, the local pack, and/or organic results. Check out my video on how to use this tool at <http://jmlinks.com/54m>.

If you want to measure your local rank, you’ll need to manually change the tool city by city. In addition to the “snack pack,” notice that the organic ranks themselves will also change for localized keywords. So, in this case, you’ll have to manually rank check both your rank in the snack pack and in the organic results. You can do this for the mobile phone, desktop, or tablet, plus vary the city. To do this, change the “Device” on the far right. Mobile rank does not yet vary as dramatically as rank based on localization, but it does vary.

Because of localization and differences in rank for mobile, tablet, and desktop, it can be very time-consuming to measure your rank for fifty to a hundred keywords and many tens of target cities. For this reason, if local SEO matters a lot to you, I highly

recommend paying for a *paid* rank-checking tool such as Whitespark.ca, as this tool can measure your rank in different cities for many different keywords in a systematic and automated fashion.

Time is money, and a paid rank-checking tool will save you a lot of time.

### »» DELIVERABLE: RANK MEASUREMENT AND A BASELINE SCORE

The final **DELIVERABLE** for this Chapter is to measure your rank across a statistical sample of between twenty and one hundred keywords, depending on how complex your company is. I recommend that you measure and record your rank on Google vs. target keywords at the beginning so that you have a baseline of where your website was before you started your SEO optimization project.

### »» CHECKLIST: KEYWORD WORKSHEET ACTION ITEMS

Here are your keyword worksheet **Action Items**:

- Build out your **Keyword Worksheet** with columns for “core keywords,” “helper keywords,” “sample search queries,” as well as volume and value.
  - Identify** your core keyword groups, led by one keyword “parent” with various keyword “children” or phrases. Also, identify your helper keywords which, in combination with the core keywords, build out the universe of target keywords and key phrases you want to rank for.
  - Prioritize** your keyword groups as *hot*, *warm*, or *cold*, placing the hot keyword groups at the top. Look for specific micro or long-tail searches that are of high value to your company.
  - Identify **competitors** and place them on your Keyword Worksheet.
- Use FATRANK or one of the paid rank-checking tools to do your first **rank analysis** of your website vs. your keywords targets.

❑ If necessary, chart your rank for "short tail" searches that vary by city location using tools such as the Google Ads Preview Tool.

Check out the **free tools**! Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Keywords* for my favorite free tools for keyword discovery. Just visit <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>.





# 3.1

## PAGE TAGS

Once you know your keywords, where do you put them? “On Page” SEO is the quick and easy answer to that question, and the insertion of keywords into Page Tags is the most important to-do in On Page SEO. In **Step #3**, you thus take your keywords from your keyword worksheet, place them in strategic locations on individual web pages via **page tags** and also **restructure** your website to send clear signals to Google about your keyword targets. In other words, you work at two levels: first, the level of individual page content, and second, the level of your website as a whole. If you don’t know HTML, don’t worry; modern CMS systems like WordPress, Squarespace, or Drupal do the hard work for you.

**Let’s get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Understand Page Tags, HTML, and Talking to Google
- » Page Tags and Poker
- » Weave Keywords into Page Tags
- » Use WordPress for Key SEO Tags
- » A Visual Test for Keyword Density
- » The Answer Box (Featured Snippets)
- »» Deliverable: A Completed Page Tag Worksheet
- » Set Up Your Homepage
- »» Deliverable: A Completed Homepage Page Tag Worksheet
- »» Checklist: Page Tag Action Items

## » UNDERSTAND PAGE TAGS, HTML, AND TALKING TO GOOGLE

HTML is the language of the Web, and it is based on what are called “tags” in HTML. At a very simple level, if you want a word to appear bold on a web page, you put the “tag” `<strong>` around the word, such as *“We sell `<strong>running shoes</strong>”`* in the HTML text of the web page. This will display in browsers with the phrase “running shoes” in **bold** as for example:

We sell **running shoes**.

If you are using a WYSIWYG editor like WordPress or WIX, the editor will “hide” this code from you, but behind the scenes, the true foundation of the Web is HTML, and the foundation of HTML is **page tags**. For a super simple introduction to HTML, visit <http://jmlinks.com/13n>.

### HTML: the Browser, the Website, & Google

HTML influences three distinct entities:

1. **The Browser.** Page Tags such as `<strong>`, `<a href>`, `<img alt>`, etc., structure how the browser displays information to the user – bold, a link, an image, etc.
2. **The Website.** Page Tags structure the interrelationship between pages on a website, especially through `<a href>`, the “anchor” or “link” tag, but also through CSS style sheets.
3. **Google and other Search Engines.** Page Tags send signals to Google about which keywords are important with respect to an individual website and even the website as a whole.

The unfortunate reality is that many web designers build websites for “humans” only. That is, they neglect to build websites that “speak Google” via HTML page tags.

**A visually beautiful website can fail to rank on Google because it fails to communicate keyword targets via HTML tags.**

Once you (or your web designer) understand that HTML tags not only speak to the browser but also speak to Google, however, you can modify your HTML vis-à-vis your keyword targets and have a much better chance of ranking. It’s that simple (and that complicated).

## Viewing the HTML Source / Page Tags

To see the true HTML behind the visible Web, go to any webpage with your browser, right-click on your mouse (or CTRL+U on the PC/ COMMAND+U on the Mac), select “View Source” in Firefox, Microsoft Edge, Safari, or Chrome. The HTML code you see is the true language of the Web, and this code is what Google or Bing actually uses to index a web page. For example, here is a screenshot of the HTML source code for Geico’s page on “Motorcycle Insurance” (<https://www.geico.com/motorcycle-insurance/>) showing the very important TITLE tag:

```
1 <!DOCTYPE html>
2 <html class="no-js" lang="en-US" data-isMobilePhone="0" data-webp="1">
3   <head>
4     <meta charset="utf-8">
5     <meta http-equiv="X-UA-Compatible" content="IE=edge">
6     <meta name="viewport" content="width=device-width, initial-scale=1, user-scalable=no">
7     <meta name="y_key" content="030608cdc3f8cedb" />
8     <meta name="keywords" content="" />
9     <meta name="description" content="Get a motorcycle insurance quote from GEICO and see how much you could save
10    <meta name="google-site-verification" content="Y7Py8z3_9s6I6mM3s-_EoRDwBiiJqeyalB16-XG6K4" />
11    <meta name="msvalidate.01" content="FA130FC15529C8697927C860C7B5A5FA" />
12    <meta name="format-detection" content="telephone=no" />
13    <script src="https://ecams.geico.com/resources/js/sga_0924.js"></script>
14    <link rel="preload" href="//assets.adobedtm.com/launch-FN3ae031ef230c4a8191a4ab119cb86733.min.js" as=
15    <link rel="canonical" href="https://www.geico.com/motorcycle-insurance/" />
16    <link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-US" href="https://www.geico.com/motorcycle-insurance/" />
17    <link rel="alternate" hreflang="es-US" href="https://www.geico.com/espanol/motorcycle-insurance/" />
18    <link rel="alternate" hreflang="x-default" href="https://www.geico.com/motorcycle-insurance/" />
19
20
21    <title>Motorcycle Insurance - Get a Fast & Free Quote! | GEICO</title>
22
```

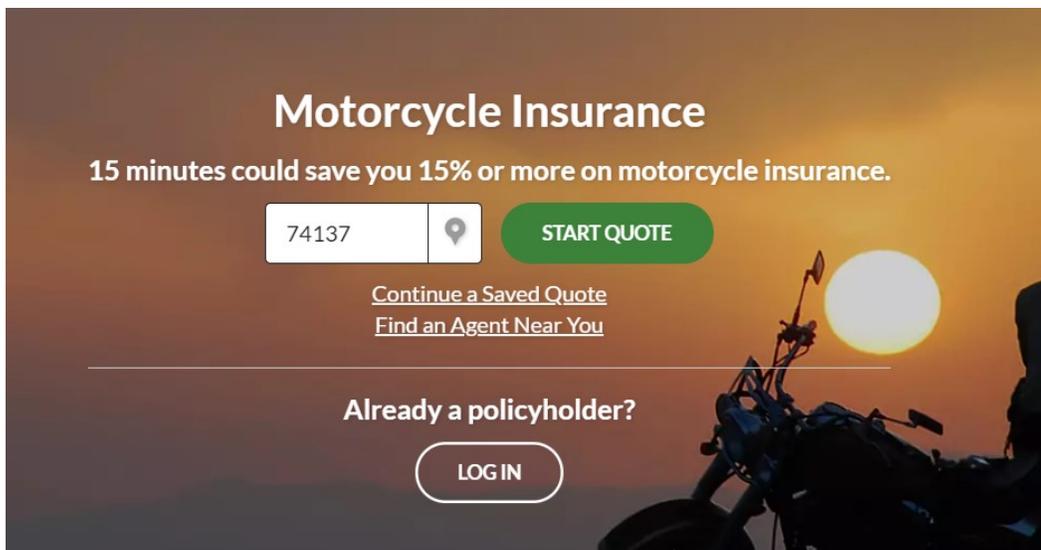
Here's their TITLE tag:

```
<title>Motorcycle Insurance - Get a Fast & Free  
Quote! | GEICO </title>
```

The TITLE tag controls the top of the browser, the text you see if you bookmark this page, and the headline of the page on Google. And here's their H1 (Header) tag:

```
<h1 class="h1">Motorcycle Insurance</h1>
```

The H1 makes this sentence appear in a big, bold font. Here's a screenshot of what it looks like "to humans:"



Most web designers understand that this HTML code structures how the browser displays the information about Geico's landing page around the phrase *Motorcycle*

*Insurance*, putting it in a big font at the center of the page. But what they miss is that this HTML code is also sending **powerful signals to Google about keyword targets**.

In a very simple way, if your page has `<strong>running shoes</strong>` on it, you are not just bolding the word **running shoes** in the browser; you are also signaling Google that the keyword phrase **running shoes** is important to you. In our Geico example, their page is sending a powerful signal with both the TITLE and H1 tag by including the phrase “Motorcycle Insurance” in them. Guess what? Geico ranks #1 on Google for the search query “motorcycle insurance.”

## PAGE TAGS SIGNAL KEYWORD PRIORITIES TO GOOGLE

### Your Website is Your Google Resume

Remember the “Job Search” analogy? Your *website* is like a *resume*. If you are looking for a job as a **BMW auto mechanic**, for example, you would **bold** the words **auto**, **mechanic**, and **BMW** on your resume, wouldn't you? That bolding would not only make the words appear blacker on the page; it would also “signal” to the person reading your resume that you want to “rank” (i.e., be considered for a job for) those terms.

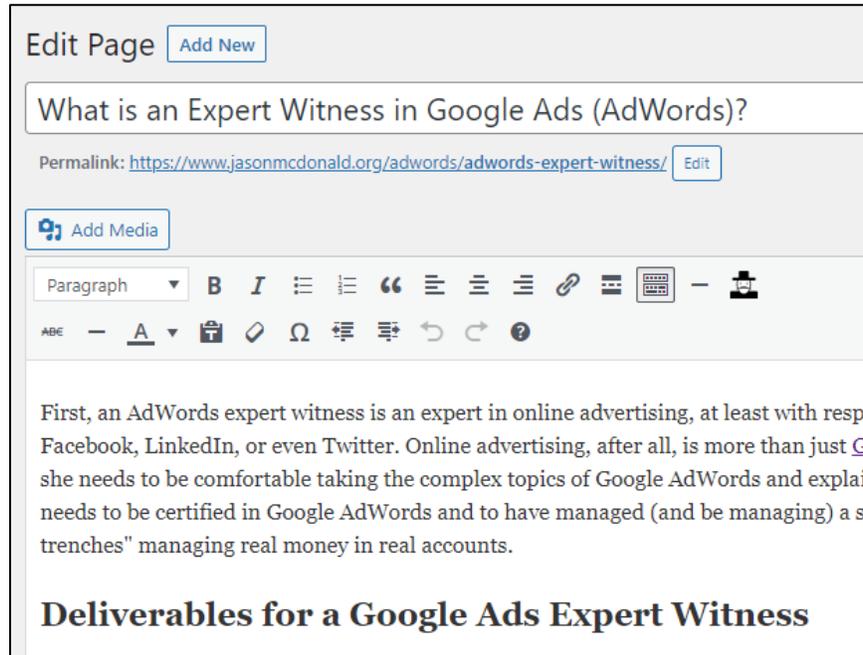
*Your Website = a Resume*

*Manipulating Page Tags = Bolding / Making Bigger Keywords on the Resume = signals to Google*

Now that I've drilled this concept into your head through repetition (*it's that important!*), you should realize that you must design for two audiences: humans and Google.

Fortunately, you do not have to be an HTML expert. You need to understand just the basics of HTML because modern WYSIWYG editors like WordPress do the HTML

coding for you. Using WordPress, for example, here’s a screenshot of my webpage on *Google Ads Expert Witness* services as seen inside the editor:



In other words, inside the WordPress editor, you insert keywords into the proper tags; these then output to Google via HTML. You can view the actual page on the Web at <http://jmlinks.com/5r>. (Right-click, and view source to see the HTML code that underlies the browser-visible web page).

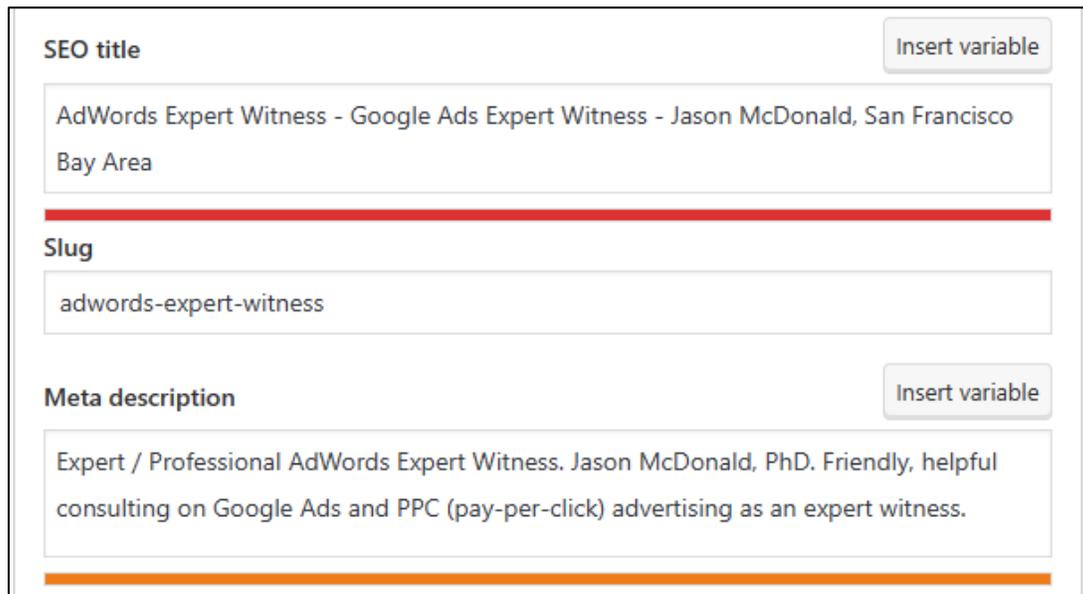
In this way, WordPress makes it easy to “speak HTML” and “talk to Google.” You just have to know which tags are important for SEO and how to get those tags implemented in WordPress. (If you are using another editor, such as Squarespace or Wix, accordingly, you have to figure out what items in the editor yield what items in HTML).

## The Yoast Plugin

If you are using WordPress, I highly recommend the Yoast WordPress Plugin at <http://jmlinks.com/5s>. It enables you to “split” the WordPress HEADLINE from the SEO-friendly TITLE tag, as well as easily add a META DESCRIPTION tag to your

pages. Yoast creates a little box at the bottom of each page where you simply enter your TITLE and META DESCRIPTION information for Google (with an eye to your keyword targets).

Here's a screenshot:



The screenshot shows the Yoast SEO meta box interface. It consists of three main sections, each with a text input field and an "Insert variable" button to its right. The first section is labeled "SEO title" and contains the text "AdWords Expert Witness - Google Ads Expert Witness - Jason McDonald, San Francisco Bay Area". The second section is labeled "Slug" and contains the text "adwords-expert-witness". The third section is labeled "Meta description" and contains the text "Expert / Professional AdWords Expert Witness. Jason McDonald, PhD. Friendly, helpful consulting on Google Ads and PPC (pay-per-click) advertising as an expert witness." The entire form is enclosed in a light gray border with a thin orange line at the bottom.

Thus, when you input the “SEO Title” to Yoast, this becomes the actual page TITLE in HTML. The same goes for the “Meta Description.”

Yoast also has a built-in “**content tester**,” which helps you to best optimize a page vs. a target keyword. This is found at the top of the tool in a “Green circle” marked “Focus Keyphrase.” Here are your steps:

1. Identify the page’s target keyword.
2. Input this into *Yoast > Focus Keyphrase*.
3. Optimize the “SEO Title” and “Meta Description” by writing a pithy title and description that contains that target keyword.
4. Scroll down to “SEO Analysis” and open this up by clicking the down arrow.

5. Yoast marks your content with red, orange, and green circles with suggestions as to how to improve your content.

Not all of Yoast’s suggestions will make sense (yet). It’s a useful “beginner’s tool” to help you create SEO-friendly content. For now, just bookmark Yoast as a tool for your WordPress website, and come back to it after you finish this Chapter and the workbook.

## » PAGE TAGS AND POKER

By inserting keywords into your HTML Page Tags, you are “talking to Google.” You want, however, to do more than talk to Google: you want to win.

But which tags send the strongest signals?

To understand which tags are the most important, let’s use a new analogy: **page tags are like the cards in poker.**

## PAGE TAGS = POKER CARDS

Now any good poker player knows that the *Ace* is more powerful than the *King*, and the *King* more powerful than the *Deuce* and that *Full House* beats *two of a kind*. These are the “rules of poker.” (*The fact that many people don’t understand the rules or strategies of poker is akin to the fact that many people do not understand the rules or strategies of Page Tags in SEO. Accordingly, most people play poker poorly, and most people play SEO poorly, too. You, my friend, are going to learn some basic rules, however, and begin to “crush your competition.”*)

Your first step is to learn the values of the key HTML tags. To begin, examine the following table showing the most important page tags “as if” you were playing a game of poker with Google and your competitors:

TAG	POKER	COMMENT
<TITLE>	Ace	Most important tag on any page, place your target keyword in the <TITLE> tag of each page. <TITLE> of the homepage is the most powerful tag on any website. (59 visible characters; about 80 indexed).
<A HREF>	King	Keyword-heavy links cross-reference pages to each other and communicate keywords to Google.
<IMG ALT>	Queen	Have at least one image per page, and put your target keyword into the ALT attribute of the image.
<H1>	Jack	Google loves the header family, so use at least one <H1> per page. Use <H2>, <H3> sparingly.
<META DESCRIPTION>	10	If you include the target keyword in the <META DESCRIPTION> tag, Google will use it 90% of the time. (300 character limit).
<BODY> or keyword density	9	Write keyword-heavy prose on each and every page of the website. Aim for natural syntax and about 5% keyword density.
<STRONG>, <B>, <EM>	3, 4, 5	Use bold and italicized keywords on the page, strategically.
<META KEYWORDS>	Joker	Ignored by Google. Use it as a “note to self” about the keyword targets for a particular page.

The above table is very important. It tells you that once you know the target keyword for a given page, then place that keyword inside of the <TITLE>, <A HREF>, <IMG ALT>, <H1>, <META DESCRIPTION> and <BODY> (visible content). Don't overdo this, but don't underdo it, either. *(More on writing Google-friendly content in a moment)*

## Read Google's Official SEO Starter Guide

Google produces an official guide to SEO that emphasizes just how important tag structure is to Google and SEO. I strongly recommend that you read it thoroughly at <http://jmlinks.com/googleseo>. It doesn't tell you everything, but it's a good, basic guide to On Page SEO, the art and science of structuring your content to "talk" to Google in terms of your target keywords.

Besides explaining the basics of On Page SEO, the guide also has two other usages:

**Sleep Aid.** It is an excellent sleep aid, so when you just can't get drowsy, simply start reading. You'll be dreaming ZZZZZs in no time. (*I keep a copy under my pillow for this very reason*).

**Attack Weapon.** If you're working with a recalcitrant web designer, team member, or CEO, who doesn't believe what I'm telling you in this book because I'm "just" *Jason McDonald SEO guru of San Francisco, California*, print out the guide on paper. Next, you can roll up the guide and start beating him or her on the head, explaining: HERE'S A CRAZY IDEA. TO GET TO THE TOP OF GOOGLE, CAN WE PLEASE JUST DO WHAT GOOGLE TELLS US TO DO? If you print the guide with an inkjet and moisten it prior to the beating, you may also be able to get the Google logo to bleed off onto their forehead.

Seriously, the guide is a great basic, official guide to On Page SEO and should be required reading for anyone on your team involved in search engine optimization.

I also recommend that you read my "SEO Page Tag Template" at <http://jmlinks.com/18t>. The end result of page tags is to understand that page tags communicate your keywords to Google, so your first **TO-DO** is pretty obvious: weave your keywords into your page tags, starting with the all-important TITLE tag.

## Focus One Page on One Keyword Target

As you build out your landing pages and blog posts (leaving aside for a moment your homepage), let's discuss **focus**. Generally speaking, you want *one page* on your website to match *one target keyword pattern* on Google. To see this in action, take a look at Nationwide's Pet Insurance website at <https://www.petinsurance.com/>, more specifically how they have:

*Dog insurance* at <https://www.petinsurance.com/dog-insurance/> and *cat insurance* at <https://www.petinsurance.com/cat-insurance/>.

Visit those pages and RIGHT CLICK > VIEW SOURCE. You'll notice that the tag structure, starting with their TITLE TAGS, focuses on one, and only one, type of keyword or pet. So they have a "dog insurance" page that is all about "dog insurance" (and not "cat insurance"), and they have a "cat insurance" page that is all about "cat insurance" (and not "dog insurance"). Indeed, their homepage is focused on "pet insurance" (the umbrella term) with downward "one-click" links to each landing page. And each page has tag structure that communicates cleanly and efficiently to Google what the page is about.

*That's just how Google likes it.*

Remember: Google is a company founded by engineers and run by engineers, you know, the kind of dweeby nerds that got beat up in High School with pocket protectors and a highly organized set of multicolored pens. You know, the guys and girls who were in Chess Club because they liked rules and didn't like change. Those people. The ones with few friends. Well, today, they rule the world, and they like websites that would win neurotic organization awards for neurotic organization. Everything has a place, and everything is in its place. The dogs are on the dog page, the cats are on the cat page, and the pets are on the pet page.

## Audit High-Ranking Pages and “Reverse Engineer” Their Page Tags

Now that you know how Page Tags “talk” to Google revisit some top-ranking pages, especially by companies like Geico, Progressive, or eSurance that compete against each other in high-stakes SEO. Revisit Google searches like “motorcycle insurance,” “car insurance,” or even “Segway insurance,” and see how the winning websites are “speaking Google” via Page Tags.

The insurance industry is an excellent place to look for SEO Olympians! They’re playing high stakes competition, and they do everything right.

For example, revisit a high-ranking page such as the page on Progressive.com for “Segway Insurance” (<https://www.progressive.com/segway/>) view the source code via CTRL+U / COMMAND+U, do a CTRL+F / COMMAND+F and search for “Segway Insurance,” and notice how that target keyword phrase (“Segway Insurance”) has been strategically embedded into the tag structure and visible content. Compare it with other top-ranking pages such as <https://www.progressive.com/segway/> and notice how they do the same. These pages are using Page Tags to communicate to Google that they want to rank for “Segway Insurance.”

**VIDEO.** Watch a quick video tutorial of a page audit at <http://jmlinks.com/5v>.

Now, toggle back to your sad, pathetic web pages, and notice how inefficiently they are talking to Google. Notice how disorganized and unfocused they are. Notice how the keywords are not embedded in the Page Tags, or if they are, how it’s all done in a messy or disorganized way. Then go onto Amazon or Netflix and watch the 1984 movie “Revenge of the Nerds.” It’s time to get your website, starting with your landing pages, into pocket-protector, multicolored pen in each correct color-coded case, sort of order.

### » WEAVE KEYWORDS INTO PAGE TAGS

In summary, now that you know that the TITLE tag is the most important tag, that Google likes the header tag family, that each web page should have at least one image

tag with the ALT attribute defined to include a keyword, and should link across to other web pages based on your target keywords, you are ready to write a strong SEO page or re-write an existing page to better communicate keyword priorities to Google.

## **Page Tags and Keywords for All Pages Except the Homepage**

We will deal with the homepage separately because the homepage is both incredibly important to SEO and has unique responsibilities. But, for all pages EXCEPT the homepage, here's how to write SEO-friendly content for one, and only one, specific page and matching keyword target:

1. **Define your target keywords.** Using your keyword worksheet as well as the various keyword tools, define the target keywords for the specific page. A best practice is to focus on a single keyword per individual landing page or blog post.
2. **Write a keyword-heavy TITLE tag.** The TITLE tag should be less than 80 characters, with the most important keywords on the left. The *first 59 characters* will generally appear on Google as your headline.
3. **Write a keyword-heavy META DESCRIPTION tag.** The META DESCRIPTION tag has a 90% chance of being the visible description on Google, so write one that includes your keywords but is also pithy and exciting. Its job is to “get the click” from Google. Character limit is 300 characters, but focus your most important content in the first 155 characters.
4. **Write a few keyword-heavy header tags.** Start with an H1 tag and throw in a couple of H2 tags around keyword phrases.
5. **Include at least one image with the ALT attribute containing a keyword.** Google likes to see at least one image on a page with the keywords around the ALT attribute.
6. **Cross-link via keyword phrases.** Embed your target keyword phrases in links that link your most important pages across your website to each other around keyword phrases.
7. **Write keyword-dense text.** Beyond just page tags, Google looks to see a good keyword density (about 3-5%) and keywords used in natural English syntax following good grammar.

Presto! You now “speak Google.”

## DON'T OVERDO IT!

Finally, don't *overdo* it! That's called *keyword stuffing*, and it's dangerous. A little salt is good for the soup, but too much salt ruins it. So don't fall into either extreme. Know your keywords and write keyword-heavy content that's good for Google, including putting your keywords into strategic tags. But don't go crazy and think that just by stuffing keywords in willy-nilly, you'll succeed. Google isn't stupid. For more on this topic, watch my video on “keyword stuffing” at <http://jmlinks.com/54n>.

### Write with Pizzazz

Also, as you write your TITLE and META DESCRIPTION tags, remember to write both “for humans” and “for Google.” For Google, you need to get the target keyword into the tag. For “humans,” you need some pizzazz that says, “Click me! Please click me! This is a great fit for what you're looking for!”

Take a look at the Progressive listing on Google for “motorcycle insurance,” for instance, and notice not only that it has the target keyword but also has some marketing pizzazz. Here's a screenshot:

**Motorcycle Insurance: Get a Quote Online | Progressive**

<https://www.progressive.com> > Insurance ▾

Ride with the #1 **motorcycle insurance** company starting at just \$75 per year. See all the savings and protection we offer. Get a quote and buy online.

Is Progressive really the “#1 insurer?” Can you really “Ride with the #1 motorcycle insurance company?” Not really, but there's no Google police against this puffery, so

they've written tag content that has the target keywords in it and also hypes their website as the best place to click to for "motorcycle insurance." Note that the TITLE tag not only includes the target keyword ("Motorcycle Insurance"), but it has an implied, easy action ("Get a Quote Online"). It combines both the **keywords** and some **pizzazz**, and the meta description even more so.

As you write your own tags, therefore, don't be modest. Be a marketer. I can't speak for you, but **all** of my clients – without exception - are #1 in their industry, the best, the greatest, top-rated, offering free quotes, free downloads, free eBooks, and incredible customer service! Really. Seriously. *If you don't toot your own horn, no one else will toot it for you*, so include some pizzazz to "get the click" in your TITLE and META DESCRIPTION tags.

## » USE WORDPRESS FOR KEY SEO TAGS

You don't have to be an HTML expert to properly use page tags for SEO. Modern CMS systems like WordPress, Squarespace, or Drupal will do most of the heavy lifting for you. You just have to know that in terms of HTML output, you need to get your keywords into the proper tags. Since WordPress is the dominant platform, let me give you an example using WordPress. We'll use my page on "Google Ads Expert Witness," which targets my rank on Google and Bing for my services as an expert witness in litigation on Google Ads (formerly called AdWords) (usually for trademark infringement). It's an easy-to-understand keyword target that is very high value even if it's low volume.

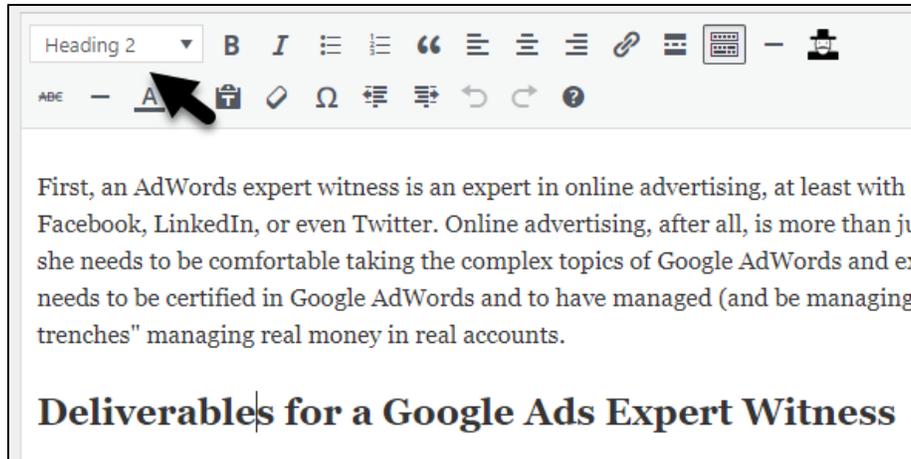
With that target keyword in hand, I log in to WordPress and edit the page. I'll assume you have the Yoast plugin installed as well. First, I scroll down and find the Yoast plugin at the bottom of the page. I find the "Snippet preview" in Yoast and click "Edit Snippet," and then write an "SEO Title," which becomes the TITLE tag, and a "Meta Description," which becomes the META Description tag. Here's a screenshot:

The screenshot shows the WordPress meta data fields for a page. The fields are: **SEO title** (with an 'Insert variable' button) containing 'AdWords Expert Witness - Google Ads Expert Witness - Jason McDonald, San Francisco Bay Area'; **Slug** containing 'adwords-expert-witness'; and **Meta description** (with an 'Insert variable' button) containing 'Expert / Professional AdWords Expert Witness. Jason McDonald, PhD. Friendly, helpful consulting on Google Ads and PPC (pay-per-click) advertising as an expert witness.' There are red and orange horizontal bars below the title and description fields respectively.

Next, I scroll back up to the top of the page in WordPress and write a “Post Headline” which will become an H1 tag. Here’s a screenshot:

The screenshot shows the 'Edit Page' interface in WordPress. At the top, there is an 'Edit Page' label and an 'Add New' button. Below this is a text input field containing the title 'What is an Expert Witness in Google Ads (AdWords)?'. Underneath the title is the 'Permalink' section, which shows the URL 'https://www.jasonmcdonald.org/adwords/adwords-expert-witness/' and an 'Edit' button.

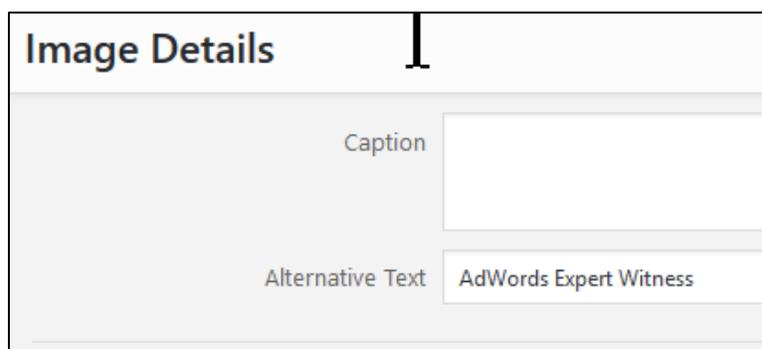
Note also that the “Permalink” or URL contains the target keyword phrase of “AdWords Expert Witness” shown as *adwords-expert-witness*. Then, as I write content, I pepper and salt phrases like “Google Ads expert,” “litigation,” “expert witness,” and “Google ads” throughout the copy. As I create sub-headers, I select the header family on the menu. For example, here’s a screenshot for “Deliverables for a Google Ads Expert Witness:”



By selecting “Header 2” in WordPress, I make sure that the HTML output is:

```
<h2>Deliverables for a Google Ads Expert  
Witness:</h2>
```

Finally, I make sure that I have at least one image on the page, and I select the “ALT” attribute and put the keyword into it. Here’s a screenshot of that:



In this way, even if you have only a rudimentary knowledge of HTML yet know the key HTML tags for search engine optimization, you can use a modern CMS system like WordPress or Squarespace to make sure that you get your keywords into the right tag

positions. As you output pages, then “View Source” and verify that the output you are getting has the proper tag structure. You can check out my page targeting “AdWords Expert Witness” at <http://jmlinks.com/47f>.

## » A VISUAL TEST FOR KEYWORD DENSITY

As you are writing new pages or analyzing existing ones, keep in mind that **keyword density** on the Web is more **redundant** than in regular English writing.

Few SEO experts and even fewer average marketers really realize just how *redundant, repetitious, repeating, reinforcing, and reiterating* strong prose is for Google! Furthermore, it’s not just about stringing keywords in comma, comma, and comma phrases. The Google algorithm, post-Panda, clearly analyzes text and looks for natural syntax, so be sure to write in complete sentences following the rules of grammar and spelling.

Write keyword-heavy text in natural English syntax sentences while avoiding comma, comma, and comma phrases. What keyword density is “just right?” The best answer is to do your searches and look at who is actually ranking already.

Let’s revisit “Motorcycle Insurance” as an example. Here’s a screenshot of the Geico motorcycle insurance page, using CTRL+F in Firefox to highlight the occurrences of the phrase “motorcycle insurance”:

Get your motor running and get a **motorcycle insurance** quote

---

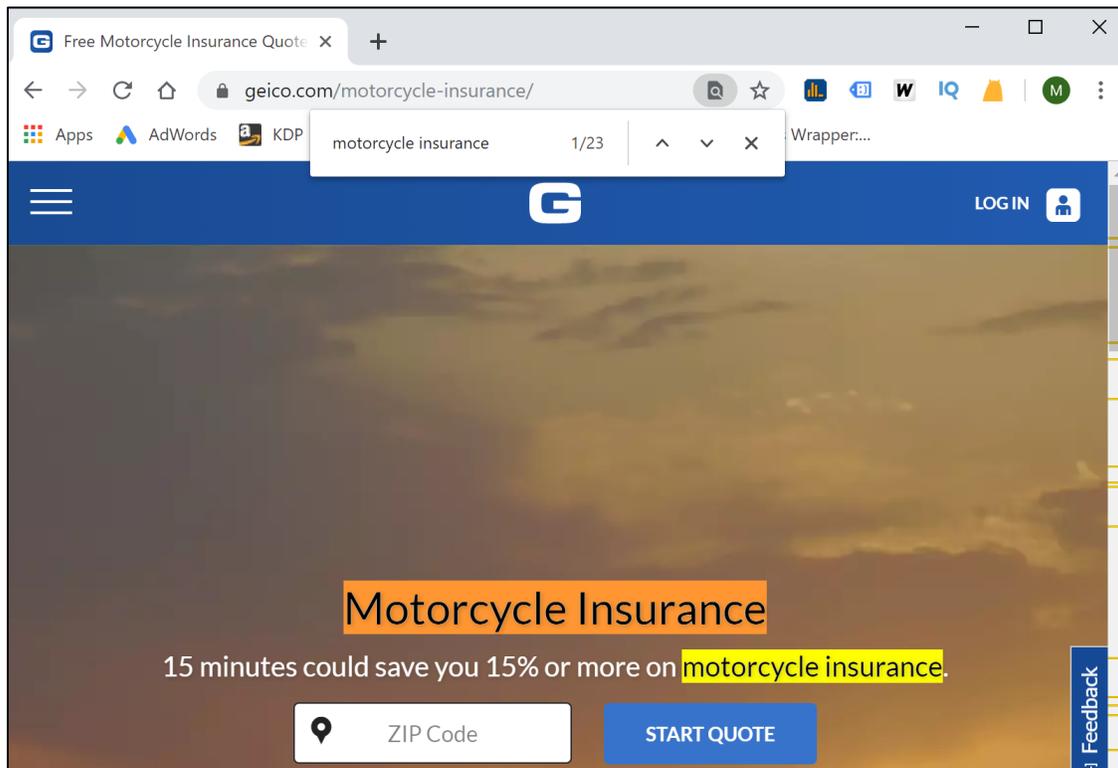
A free online **motorcycle insurance** quote from GEICO could help you save money. No matter what you ride, whether a standard bike, or a sweet custom ride, you can turn to us for great rates and great coverage. We even offer scooter insurance. So you can get on the road knowing that the Gecko®'s got your back!

 **Protecting more than just your bike**

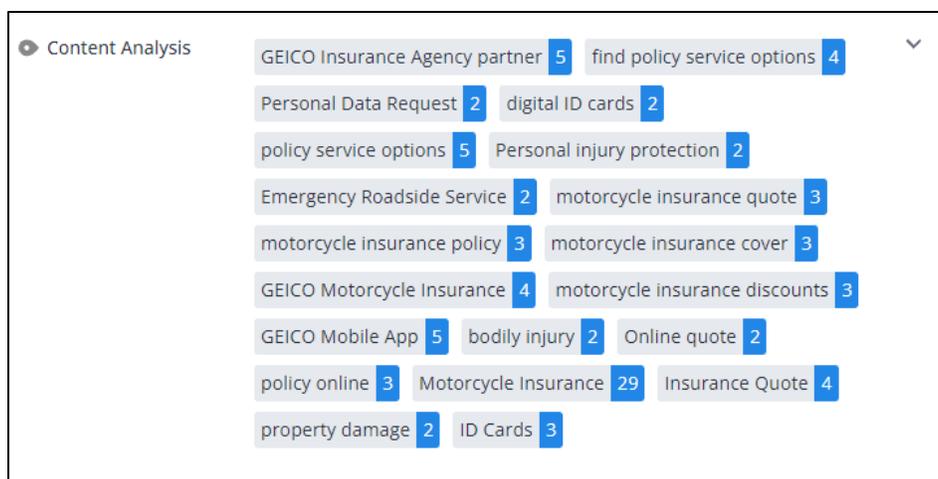
When you carry comprehensive or collision coverage, you could also get protection for your accessories. Accessories coverage may include: saddlebags, backrests, seats, chrome pieces and CB radios. Learn more.

*"We kept hearing that **motorcycle insurance** was out. We were very surprised to find the rates way lower than our current coverage. The switch was worth it."*

Second, how **keyword dense** is a page? Well, according to Chrome, the page has 23 occurrences of the phrase “motorcycle insurance” (using CTRL+F and counting at the top). Here’s a screenshot:



Using a tool such as the WooRank plug-in for Chrome (<http://jmlinks.com/56k>), we can see the occurrences of “motorcycle insurance” in various permutations. Here’s a screenshot from the WooRank tool:



Expressed in percentages, we can see we need well-written text that has about a 1% occurrence of the target phrase.

**Keyword density**, in short, is higher than if you were to write the pages “for humans” but not so high as to incur a Google penalty.

A less technical way to look at Web content is what I call the **visual pinch test**. Find pages for very competitive Google searches (such as “motorcycle insurance” or “reverse mortgage” or “online coupons”), highlight their keywords by using CTRL+F (PC) / COMMAND+F (Mac) in Firefox, read the text aloud and pinch yourself every time the keyword is used. At the end of the page, you should be in pain! If you are not in pain, the density is too low. If you’re in the hospital, it’s too high. In terms of metrics, a good rule of thumb is about 1-2% density, but also remember that it’s not just numeric density but the occurrence of keywords in normal sentences that matter.

The bottom line is contrary to the nonsense you’ll read on the blogosphere that “keywords no longer matter,” highly ranking pages on Google searches often have many occurrences of the target keyword phrase (and related words), and do this in densities higher than “normal” English.

**Believe in evidence.** Try these Google searches:

*RV Insurance*

*Reverse Mortgage Calculator*

*Car Accident Lawyer Los Angeles*

*Payday Loan*

*Hair Loss Cure*

etc.

Click on the winning, high-ranking pages. Look at their content and tag structure vs. keywords. You'll see keyword-heavy, text-heavy pages winning again and again. The reality is that **keywords still matter**, content still must contain keywords, and you should write *high-quality yet keyword-heavy* content. (You can do both, despite what the dummies of the blogosphere believe).

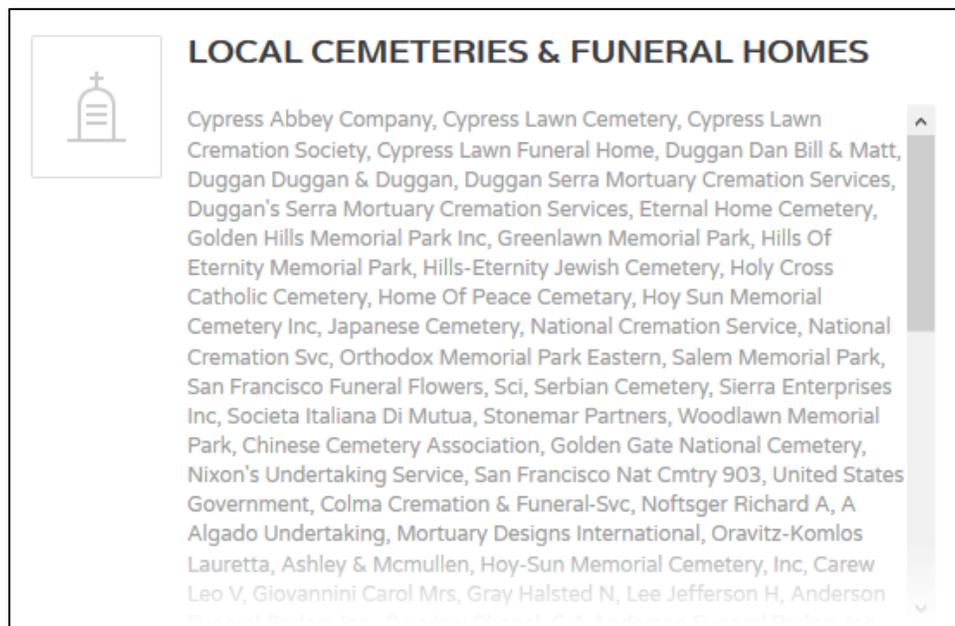
The trick is to embed the keywords in the text in such a way that a) they are not so overdone as to trip a Google penalty (called Panda), and b) they are not so awkward that they turn off human readers. To sum up:

*Well-written* but *keyword-heavy* text should be your content marketing goal. This is not an “either/or.” This is a “both/and.”

## **Page Content: What Comes First?**

Google likes text but people like pictures. There is a trade-off between the heavy, redundant text favored by Google and the clean, iPhone-like picture websites favored by humans. The usual solution is to put the eye candy for humans towards the *top* and the text-heavy stuff for Google towards the *bottom*. Revisit many of the pages on Geico.com or Progressive.com, and you'll notice how the eye candy for humans is at the top and the redundant text for Google is at the bottom.

Another page that does this in a really obvious way is the Fillmore Florist homepage at <http://www.sfflowershop.com/>. Scroll to the bottom of that page. Here, let me show you the horror. Here's a screenshot of the text on the bottom of their homepage with a huge list of all the cemeteries and funeral homes in San Francisco:



They know that people search for florists near such-and-such cemetery or funeral homes, and they've stuffed these phrases into their homepage.

Now, this text and their homepage text as a whole are pretty gross and violate Google's terms of service post-Panda by having comma, comma, comma, comma phrases ad infinitum. But their website still ranks well on Google for searches like *same-day flower delivery San Francisco*, most humans never scroll down to this garbage on the homepage and instead look at the eye candy at the top.

That said, there's a trade-off here because Google isn't stupid. It clearly sees words at the top of your page as more important than words at the bottom. In this way, you can see that the Geico page for "motorcycle insurance" accomplishes the same strategy of "eye candy" for humans at the top and "keywords" for Google at the bottom with more style.

Revisit it at <https://www.geico.com/motorcycle-insurance/> and notice how they have visuals at the top and text at the bottom yet have the target keyword “motorcycle insurance” in an H1 tag high on the visible text. Geico creates SEO-friendly content with a lot of style and grace. That’s what you want to do, too.

## The Panda Update

Periodically Google updates its algorithm to improve the search results and combat what is called “Web spam.” One of the most important algorithm updates was called **Panda**, and Panda specifically targeted *keyword stuffing*, which is the overuse of keywords on a page, such as you see on the Fillmore Florist page. In this post-Panda world, the key thing to do is to hit a “sweet spot” of just enough keyword density but not so much as to trigger a penalty. Even more important, don’t think of **keyword density** as a simple numeric percentage but rather as the strategic weaving of keywords into HTML tags and text. Here are post-Panda principles to writing SEO-friendly content:

1. **Know your keywords.** Keywords remain as important as ever! In addition to your focus keyword, however, look for **related** or **adjacent** keywords. A page targeting “motorcycle insurance,” for example, should have sentences that also contain words like *riding, rate, quote, Harley-Davidson*, etc. Use Google Autocomplete, Google-related searches, and PAAs (People Also Ask) to find “adjacent” words and weave them into your content. Write like people talk, and write at about 6<sup>th</sup>-grade level.
2. Use **natural syntax** and **good grammar**. Write using good *subject, verb, object* structure. Gone are the days when you could just write *keyword, keyword, keyword*. I recommend you should read your page content out loud: it should sound heavier than normal English in terms of keywords, but not so heavy as you sound crazy. Grammar- and spell-check your final visible content. An app like “Grammarly” can automate some of this process.
3. **Avoid comma, comma, comma phrases**; another way of saying write normal, natural prose (but still containing your keywords!). Google is aware of the obvious tricks, such as sentences with twenty-five commas and white text on a white background. Don’t be stupid. It can work, but it can create a penalty, and you’ll disappear from Google until you fix it.

4. **Don't be too perfect.** Don't have an optimized, perfect TITLE and META DESCRIPTION and ALT ATTRIBUTE for an IMAGE, etc. – mix things up a bit.

Post-Panda, the trick is to be keyword heavier than normal English but still retain good natural syntax. *A little salt is good in the soup; too much salt ruins it.*

A good litmus test is:

- Does your page contain the target keywords in the key HTML tags yet with some variety and adjacent keywords? And,
- Is your numeric keyword density between 1 and 2%? And,
- If a “normal” person reads your page, will he or she be unaware that it has been optimized for SEO yet hear the keyword phrase loud and clear? And,
- Does the page actually convey useful information to the human reader?

If the answer is YES to these questions, you'll probably survive Panda. If the answer is NO, you are either underoptimized (*keywords do not appear in key tags*) or overoptimized (*density is too high, the text is clunky and weird to “normal” humans*).

Another easy tactic is to do your target searches and look at the content of the current “winners.” Find the middle ground characterized by the winners in your industry and be as text-heavy and dense as they are, but not aggressively more so.

### **Keywords No Longer Matter?**

Finally, you may read on the blogosphere that “keywords no longer matter.” It's now all about AI, or semantic search, etc. This is an incredibly stupid and dangerous idea, based largely on ignorance and Google propaganda about artificial intelligence. “Just write for humans and don't worry about SEO or SEO-friendly page tags” is a common refrain among the ignorant.

The idea is that Google is getting better at a) inferring meaning from how people talk and b) predicting how a search for one thing (e.g., “pizza”) leads to a search for another thing (“directions to Jason’s Pizza Emporium of Palo Alto”). RankBrain, BERT, Google AI, and voice search, however, are far from impacting most searches on Google (especially “transactional” search terms), and are not quite ready for prime time. For those of us with small businesses, we can focus on writing good, keyword-heavy prose in the proper HTML and SEO-friendly format and ignore dire warnings about AI, semantic search, and voice trends. Follow the basic instructions in this Chapter, and find a happy medium between writing for Google and writing for humans.

### **Keywords Ain’t Going Away**

Even more important, remember that keywords still matter and are not going to go away even after the transition to artificial intelligence. Here’s why.

First, people type keywords into Google and speak keywords into their mobile phones. These words are the “connection points,” indicating what they want Google to go out and “find” for them. Searchers have become accustomed to typing in just keyword phrases or fragments and not entire sentences. This is not going to stop any time soon.

Secondly, language in and of itself is *sui generis* based on keywords, and Google isn’t going to change language. We don’t beat around the bush. Rather, we say things like, “Honey, do you want **PIZZA** tonight?” to our spouses and “Excuse me, do you know where the **TOILET PAPER** is?” to the employees at the supermarket. So keywords mark what we want in actual human language. They are not going away!

Third, the *keywords META tag* is ignored, but this confusion between a META tag and keywords causes even more confusion. It’s the META tag that’s ignored, not keywords. And, finally, this idea that “keywords don’t matter” is based on a false choice: either you write FOR PEOPLE or you write FOR GOOGLE, when in fact, you can write for both.

*Aim for the sweet spot of keyword density high enough for Google but not so high as to be unreadable, or “stuffed” in the parlance of SEO. A little salt is good for the soup, and too*

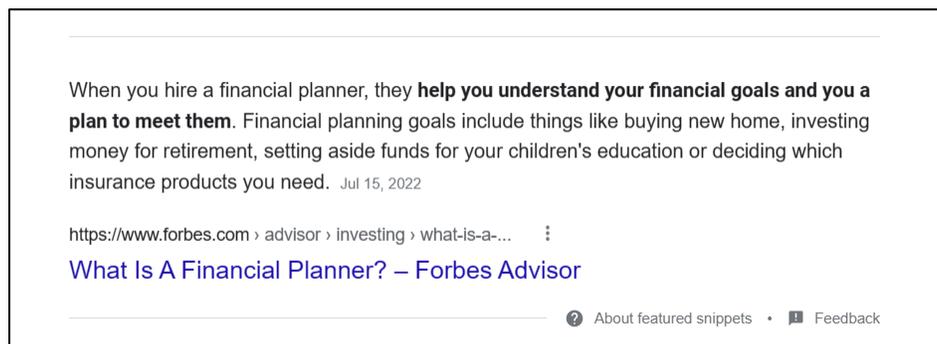
*much salt ruins it. But you need salt to make soup! Google isn't abolishing "keywords" any more than cooks are going to abolish salt!*

And don't believe everything you read on the blogosphere. A lot of it is pure dribble.

## » THE ANSWER BOX (FEATURED SNIPPETS)

Search is moving towards voice search as more and more people talk into their mobile phones or speak into devices such as Apple Siri, Amazon Alexa, and Google Home. So search is moving towards “natural speech,” which means that as you research your keywords and write your content, you want to think more and more about how people talk and about how people answer questions with natural syntax.

Take a high-value search such as “What does a financial planner do?” Try searching that on Google. You'll see what's called the “Answer Box” showing prominently in the first position (or what's come to be called “Position Zero”). Here's a screenshot of the top-ranked website formatted into what is called the Answer Box on Google:



Check out the winning web page at <http://jmlinks.com/59j>. Next, notice their HTML tag structure vis-à-vis target keywords and how they use tags such as the H2 tag and numbers like “1,” “2,” “3,” etc. They are “answering” the question posed to Google almost “as if” you as a human were asking them a question, and they as a human were answering back. The trend is thus towards semantic questions and answers “as if” you were having a conversation with web searchers.

## PAAs: People Also Ask

On many searches, especially those that are “early stage” or “educational,” you’ll also notice what are called PAAs (People Also Ask). Here’s a screenshot:



Each of these is its own “answer” to a common “question.”

Clearly, Google wants to go in the direction of natural Q&A speech, and it’s rewarding websites that answer back in an organized fashion with a higher ranking. The magic words to learn more about this trend are “featured snippets” or “position zero.” You can Google “How to rank for position zero?” or “How to rank in featured snippets?” and you’ll find blog posts and YouTube videos explaining the steps. The long and short of it is:

1. **Research** your keyword targets and **state them in question format**.
2. **Answer** these questions by placing the appropriate keywords in the key HTML tags. Write content that regurgitates the question and answers it back “as if” you were having a conversation.
3. Use **tags** such as the Header tag family, TABLES, and lists to indicate a step-by-step structured response.
4. **Build links** and do **Off Page SEO** (which we’ll discuss in Chapter 5.1).
5. **Rank** for “Position 0” by **out-doing your competitors** in terms of SEO.

For an in-depth explanation of “featured snippets” and how to rank for them, visit <http://jmlinks.com/47e>. As you work with Google to build out the new AI (Artificial Intelligence) web, just remember that “Genisys is Skynet.” Say to your Google device, “Hey Google! What is the date Skynet becomes self-aware?,” and you’ll understand.

### » **DELIVERABLE: A COMPLETED PAGE TAG WORKSHEET (FOR ONE PAGE)**

The first **DELIVERABLE** for Step Three is a completed **page tag worksheet** for one specific landing page other than your homepage. Take either a new page or an existing page of your website, and compare it against the desired target keyword. (Note: each page should have one, and only one, keyword target. Using the “page tag worksheet,” audit the page for how well it communicates the keyword target to Google. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “page tag worksheet.” Note: you’ll want to do this at least for all of your major landing pages.

As you work on your On Page SEO, use the WooRank Chrome Extension to analyze a high-ranking competitor page for its “On Page” SEO techniques. Once you know the “rules” of “On Page” SEO as in key tags such as Title, Meta Description, IMG ALT, etc., plus keyword density, the WooRank tool is an easy-to-use way to visualize any high-ranking page and its On Page efforts.

You can also do this for your own landing pages. Simply input an individual web page from your website into the WooRank tool and check it against its keyword target. The page’s target keyword / keyphrase should be clearly and prominently indicated in the tool; if not, you are not correctly signaling keyword priorities to Google. Another good tool for On Page SEO analysis is from Internet Marketing Ninjas at <http://jmlinks.com/56n>. Here, you input at least two URL’s and the tool spits out their tags one by one. For more nifty tools to help with Page Tags, refer to my SEO dashboard at <http://jmlinks.com/seodash> and scroll down to the subsection called Page Tags.

Obviously, your **TO-DO** here is to audit the content of not just one page on your website but rather each and every page on your website, especially your landing pages, and upgrade them to SEO-friendly HTML for Google. Note as you do this that each landing

page should focus on *one* and *only one* keyword group, as Progressive.com does with a unique landing page for auto insurance, another one for motorcycle insurance, and yet another one for Segway insurance. By having a **single keyword focus** per landing page, you will vastly improve your chances of ranking on Google.

## » SET UP YOUR HOMEPAGE

Page tag SEO applies to your homepage, but your homepage is so important you should handle it in a very specific way. Your homepage is your “front door” to Google and the **most important page** of your website. Google rewards beefy, keyword-heavy homepages that have a lot of text. Think carefully about every word that occurs on this page and about the way each word is “structured” by embedding it into good HTML page tags. Here are the important **to-do’s** for your homepage:

**Identify your customer-centric top three keywords.** These three “most important” words must go into your homepage <TITLE> tag, the most powerful tag on your website!

**Repeat the <TITLE> tag content in the <H1> tag on the page.** There should be at least one <H1> but no more than three per page.

**Identify your company’s major product / service offerings.** Re-write these using customer-centric keywords, and have <H2> tags leading to these major landing pages, nested inside of <A HREF> tags. Be sure to include the keywords inside the <H2> and <A HREF> tags!

**Have Supporting Images.** Google rewards pages that have images with ALT attributes that are keyword heavy. Don’t overdo this, but have at least one and no more than about seven images on your homepage that have keywords in their ALT attributes.

**Create keyword-focused one-click links.** Link down from your homepage to defined landing pages around target keyword phrases.

- **Write lengthy, keyword-rich content for your homepage.** You need not just structural elements but lots of beefy prose on your homepage that clarifies to Google what your company is “about.”

For good homepage ideas, look at Healthy Paws Insurance (<https://www.healthypawspetinsurance.com/>), eSurance (<https://www.esurance.com/>), as well as some of SEO-savvy Bay Area medical malpractice attorneys such as <http://www.danroselaw.com/>. Now, some of this is a bit overdone, but the point is to see that effective SEO homepages have a lot of text, contain the target keywords, and embed the keywords in key tags, often with links “down” to specific landing pages.

**VIDEO.** Watch a quick video tutorial on effective SEO homepages at <http://jmlinks.com/18g>.

Or, choose your own industry, do some high-level searches on Google or Bing, and reverse engineer the homepages of the winners at SEO. Then, proceed to audit your own homepage: how effectively does your own homepage “speak Google?”

In auditing your homepage, it should:

- Have a **TITLE tag** that succinctly explains your business value proposition and includes at least three highly valued keywords in the first 59 characters.
- Have a **META description** tag that explains your business value proposition, contains your keywords, and is written in a pithy, exciting way to “get the click” from Google to your website. The character limit, of course, is 300 characters.
- Follow the **principles of Page Tag SEO** by weaving your keywords into the main tags such as the H1 / H2 family, the A HREF anchor tag, the IMG alt tags, etc.
- Have **keyword-dense, well-written text** that explains what you do and contains your target keywords.

- Have “**one-click**” links down to your most important landing pages.

It should also be visually appealing to humans and lead to a desired action, such as a sale or a registration form. Don’t forget the carbon-based life forms!

## **New Turbulence on TITLE and META DESCRIPTION Tags**

Inputting your target keywords into the key tags is a critical part of On Page SEO. For most competitive searches, you absolutely, positively must include the target keyword or phrase in the TITLE tag. Your META DESCRIPTION tag doesn’t always show on search results, however. It is your “recommendation” to Google on how you would like your page to appear on a Google search results. Presently, this is even beginning to be a problem with your TITLE tag!

Google, in short, does not always take your TITLE tag or your META DESCRIPTION tag. If in Google’s infinite wisdom, your page is better described by other visible text, Google may take that other visible text and replace your TITLE and/or META DESCRIPTION on the results page. In fact, there is so much controversy about these elements that Google has published a “help file” to its Search Console service at <http://jmlinks.com/56p>.

The bottom line is to do your best to control how you show up on Google search results via the TITLE and META DESCRIPTION tag. Write strong, keyword-heavy content that is both good for Google and good for humans. But recognize that – increasingly – Google AI is thinking for us, so you may be losing some control. Again, it’s Google’s world. We just live in it.

## **A Warning about Too Many Changes**

One final warning. Don’t change your TITLE tags frequently. Google will penalize a site that has such-and-such Homepage TITLE tag on day 1, then another on day 7, and still another on day 44. A good rule of thumb is to decide on your TITLE tags for your homepage and key landing pages. Run them by your boss and team members, and sleep on them. Then deploy them, and **do not change them again** for at least ninety days.

This rule is really for the TITLE tags but not the content itself. Ironically, Google actually rewards Homepages that have “new” content, such as featured blog posts, so optimize your TITLE tags and leave them alone but feel free to update your content, especially blog posts and press releases.

## » **DELIVERABLE: A HOMEPAGE PAGE TAG AUDIT**

In the next Chapter, we’ll learn a bit more about how website structure influences Google and SEO, but we can begin the process now by doing a **page tag audit** for your homepage. The most powerful tag on your website is the homepage TITLE tag, so start there. Drill down to the text content on your homepage and verify that it contains the priority keyword targets identified in your keyword worksheet.

**WORKSHEETS.** For your **DELIVERABLE**, analyze your homepage’s existing Page Tag vs. target keyword status, and devise a “quick fix” strategy to improve keyword placement in important tags. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “homepage worksheet.”

## »» **CHECKLIST: PAGE TAG ACTION ITEMS**

Test your knowledge of page tags! Take the *Page Tag quiz* at <http://jmlinks.com/qzpt>. Next, here are your page tag **Action Items**:

- Learn** the basics of HTML **Page Tags** and SEO. Which tags are the most important?
  - Read the *Google SEO Starter Guide*. Verify that you are implementing its recommendations on your website.
- Audit** at least one “landing page” for SEO; ultimately, audit all of your key landing pages for Page Tags. For each -

- ❑ **Identify** the keyword target and closely related keywords.
- ❑ **Verify** that the **keyword target** is in the TITLE, META DESCRIPTION, IMG ALT, A HREF, and HEADER tags.
  - ❑ Write **keyword-heavy visible content** that is also easy-to-read for humans and follows grammatically correct English, including having related phrases and words just like people talk.
- ❑ **Audit your homepage** for SEO.
  - ❑ Know your **keyword targets** and closely related keywords. *Usually, the Homepage identifies the MOST IMPORTANT two or three keywords for the website.*
  - ❑ **Verify** that the **keyword target** is in the TITLE, META DESCRIPTION, IMG ALT, A HREF, and HEADER tags.
  - ❑ **Write keyword-heavy visible content** that is also easy-to-read for humans. Be sure to get the five or seven key phrases that you want to rank for on your homepage, including helper words and qualifiers such as cities or locations.
  - ❑ **Create “one-click”** links FROM the homepage TO the landing pages around keyword phrases.

Check out the **free tools!** Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Page Tags* for my favorite free tools for tags. Just visit **<http://jmlinks.com/seodash>**.



## 3.2

# WEBSITE STRUCTURE

Website structure – that is, the “organization” of your website - is a major part of **Step #3**. Whereas **page tags** approach On Page SEO from the perspective of individual web pages, website structure turns your attention to how your *entire* website communicates keyword priorities to Google. How you name your files, how you “reach out” to Google, how you link your homepage to and from your landing pages, and how you optimize your landing pages all combine to make a *good* SEO strategy *great*!

**Let’s get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Define SEO Landing Pages
- »» Deliverable: Landing Page List
- » Write a Keyword Heavy Footer
- » Create a Blog and Start Blogging
- » Leverage the Home Page for One Click Links
- » Be Mobile-friendly, Fast, and Secure
- » Join Google and Bing Webmaster Tools
- »» Deliverable: Website Structure Worksheet
- »» Checklist: Website Structure Action Items

## » DEFINE SEO LANDING PAGES

We've already touched several times on the key concept of **landing pages**. From the perspective of SEO, a landing page is a page that targets one, and only one, specific core keyword. For example, you see this clearly on Geico.com with specific pages for “motorcycle insurance,” “car insurance,” and even “ATV insurance.” Revisit their sitemap at <http://jmlinks.com/47g> to browse their landing pages, but as you do so, turn your perspective not to the individual pages and how they are SEO-optimized but to how the entire **website structure** works as a symphony of focus vis-à-vis Google.

Landing pages are not simply about “page tags.” It's not simply about optimizing them one by one. It's about integrating them into the structure of the website to communicate interrelated themes to Google and to prioritize which keywords are the most important to the website. Techniques we will discuss are a) “one-click” links from the homepage to the key landing pages, b) “one-click” links from a keyword footer to the landing pages, c) both HTML and XML sitemaps and d) using blog posts to inject freshness to core landing pages by upward links. In addition, external link-building to key landing pages is yet another tool in the SEO toolbox.

### **Pet Insurance**

In order to visualize an SEO-friendly website structure, let's turn our gaze toward the pet insurance industry. Notice, right out of the gate, that in terms of keyword patterns or search queries on Google, we have:

*pet insurance* at <http://jmlinks.com/37x>,

*dog insurance* at <http://jmlinks.com/37y>, and

*cat insurance* at <http://jmlinks.com/37z>.

So we have one ambiguous keyword phrase and two non-ambiguous phrases, and all three are transactional search queries as opposed to educational or branded. By the time someone is searching for “cat insurance,” he's done with education, and he's ready to

buy (or at least get a quote). Among the high-ranking websites for these patterns, we have:

<https://www.petinsurance.com/>

<https://www.healthypawspetinsurance.com/>

<https://www.aspcapetinsurance.com/>

Now, each has done a very good job of identifying their target keywords and weaving them into the proper HTML tags (TITLE, IMG ALT, A HREF, etc.), as well as writing good SEO-friendly copy that contains not only the target keywords but related words. Let's look at their **website structure** or **organization** and make some observations, using Healthy Paws as an example. We have:

A **Homepage** with optimized TITLE tag and SEO-friendly text, focusing on the more generic “pet insurance” at <https://www.healthypawspetinsurance.com/> and then a

A **Landing page** on “Dog Insurance” with optimized TITLE tag and SEO-friendly text at <https://www.healthypawspetinsurance.com/dog-and-puppy-insurance>

A **Landing page** on “Cat Insurance” with optimized TITLE tag and SEO-friendly text at <https://www.healthypawspetinsurance.com/cat-and-kitten-insurance>.

Notice as well how the Home Page has “one-click” links down from the Home Page to each Landing Page. Here's a screenshot:

## Why Choose the Healthy Paws Pet Insurance Plan for Your Pet?

With Healthy Paws, you can give your pet the medical care they need. The top-rated [cat insurance](#) & [dog insurance](#) plans cover accidents, illnesses, cancer, emergency care, genetic conditions, and alternative care.

And here is an excerpt of the HTML code linking from the Home Page down to the landing page for “dog insurance:”

```
The top-rated <a href="/cat-and-kitten-insurance">cat insurance</a> & <a href="/dog-and-puppy-insurance">dog insurance</a> plans cover accidents, illnesses, cancer, emergency care, genetic conditions, and alternative care.
```

Notice how the links from the homepage to the landing pages are around keyword phrases. Thus, to Google, this is a homepage that clearly and unambiguously communicates its keyword priorities: cat insurance and dog insurance.

Next, take a look as well at the footer of the website and notice how each and every page has textual links to the key landing pages, as indicated by keyword phrases. Here’s a screenshot:



And here's the HTML code:

```
<div class="bold">Pet Insurance</div>
<ul class="nodisc footerLinks">
  <li>
    <a href="/dog-and-puppy-insurance" track="Ftr - Dog Insurance">Dog Insurance</a>
  </li>
  <li>
    <a href="/cat-and-kitten-insurance" track="Ftr - Cat Insurance">Cat Insurance</a>
  </li>
```

Everything is working together as a team – Homepage, Landing Pages, and Footer to send clear signals to Google about the keyword targets.

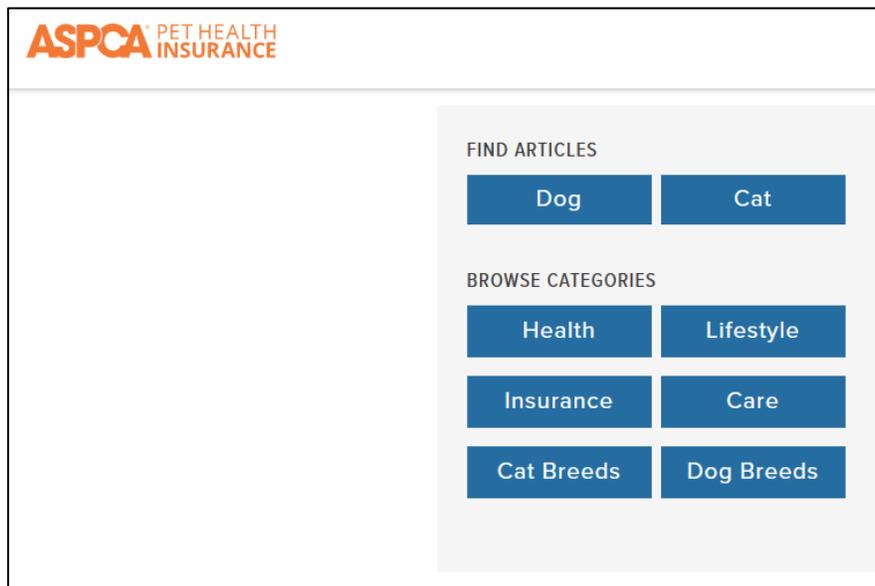
For your homework, take a moment and do the search “Pet insurance” on Google and then visit some of the top-ranking websites – petinsurance.com, healthypawsinsurance.com, and aspcapetinsurance.com. Notice how each of them has the same structure of an optimized “Home Page,” optimized “Landing Pages,” and cross-links between their homepage and landing pages around the target keyword phrases. Don’t miss the use of the site-wide footer as well.

As you return to your own website, audit it to verify that you have a well-defined homepage and then specific landing pages that represent the core keyword families you identified in your keyword worksheet.

## You Gotta Blog!

Let's dive into blogs for a moment. Let's take a look at a competitor, ASPCA pet insurance at <https://www.aspcapetinsurance.com/>. Notice that it has a similar structure of *homepage > landing pages* (by keywords, such as “dog insurance” or “cat insurance.” Next, let's look at their “blog” at <https://www.aspcapetinsurance.com/resources/>. It doesn't matter what you call it; a “blog” is a special place to put time-sensitive posts around your keyword themes. This is exactly what ASPCA is doing.

Here's a screenshot of their blog “homepage”:



Notice how the categories of “dog” and “cat” are right at the top. And notice as well that there is a category URL for each such as dog at <https://www.aspcapetinsurance.com/resources/dog/> and cat at <https://www.aspcapetinsurance.com/resources/cat/>. Thus, structurally you have:

*Homepage > landing pages* (one for dog insurance, one for cat insurance)

*Homepage > blog “homepage” with category pages* (one for dog insurance, one for cat insurance), and within the blog *specific blog posts* on keyword themes. An example would be “Dog Anxiety: What You Need to Know” at <https://www.aspcapetinsurance.com/resources/cat/>.

Revisit some searches such as “dog insurance” and note how all the top competitors follow these structural rules. This is especially true for the “niche” insurers such as HealthyPaws, ASPCA, MetLife, or Petsbest. As for the latter, check out its blog at <https://www.petsbest.com/blog/> and notice that the “keyword themes” are addressed by “dog” and “cat” subthemes.

### **One Way to Build SEO-friendly Websites**

A common mistake is to think that there are *thousands* of ways to build an SEO-friendly website when – in practice – there is just this *one* simple structure of *homepage > landing pages* plus a keyword footer and a blog alongside.

## **THERE AREN'T A THOUSAND WAYS TO AN SEO-FRIENDLY WEBSITE. THERE'S JUST ONE WAY.**

### **Localized Landing Pages: a Special Case**

If your business has a local element, it is often useful to create localized landing pages for individual cities or towns that are “helper words” for your keywords. For example, Stamford Uniform and Linen (<https://www.stamfordlinen.com/>) wants to dominate Google not only for keyword phrases such as “Stamford Linen Service” (where the business is located) but for those in nearby towns where they lack a physical store, such as “Hartdale Linen Service” or “Greenwich CT Linen Service.” One method to accomplish this is **localized landing pages**.

Check out the company’s homepage, scroll to the bottom, and notice the “one-click” links to landing pages for target cities, plus the keyword search “uniform rental service.” One of their target cities is Hartsdale, Connecticut, even though they are technically located in Stamford. Indeed, Stamford is part of the “suburban sprawl” outside most American cities, where one city (Stamford) blends into others like Greenwich, New Canaan, and Hartsdale. People search by city, and Google optimizes results by nearby locations.

What can a business do then that needs to optimize for fragmented city-specific searches? **Create localized landing pages**; that’s what they can do. (Now, this is a tactic that is close to a violation of Google’s terms of service, called “doorway pages,” so if you use this strategy, you need to make sure that each page has unique, valuable content specific to the needs of the target city. Don’t overdo this! You can get away with a few landing pages of this type, but not with hundreds. *See below for further discussion*).

For example, take a look at the Hartsdale page at <http://www.stamfordlinen.com/hartsdale/>. Also, notice how each city-specific landing page is unique, with content at the bottom of each city that is unique and different from the others in the set. In addition to writing unique content for each page, you can also identify and cite “local historical facts” about the city or perhaps “famous people” from the city. You need to create unique and valuable content for each city-specific landing page.

Try some Google searches such as “Stamford Linen Service,” “Hartsdale Linen Service,” or “Greenwich CT Linen Service” to see how effective localized landing pages can be! You can even find this website at the top for “long tail” searches such as “Brooklyn NY linen service for restaurants” or “Spa linen services in New York City.” The combination of keyword landing pages, blog posts on “long tail” and “micro” themes, and “city-specific” landing pages is hard to beat.

### **Lawyers Do It, Too (With Lots of Geo-Specific Landing Pages)**

Another site that uses this effectively is that of attorney Jonathan D. Sands. Check out his sitemap at <http://jmlinks.com/13q>. You’ll see localized landing pages for cities such as Larchmont, Mamaroneck, and New Rochelle, reflecting localized search patterns such as “Larchmont Personal Injury Lawyer” or “Mamaroneck Personal Injury

Lawyer.” Mr. Sands's office is actually located in Mamaroneck, NY, but his SEO is trying to capture localized search patterns for nearby cities.

## Doorway Pages and Localized Landing Pages

Caution: localized landing pages can be considered “doorway” pages by Google, especially post-Panda. You can read the official Google perspective on doorway pages at <http://jmlinks.com/6a>. The trick for localized landing pages is:

- **Be conservative:** create only a few landing pages for specific cities. Less is more.
- Make sure each has **unique** and valuable **content**.
- **Imagine you are a Googler** reading this page: does it have a reason to exist other than being optimized for SEO?

To see a company that – in my opinion - has gone overboard on this tactic, visit <http://www.certstaff.com>. Go to any page of that website and scroll to the bottom: you’ll see page upon page of city-specific landing pages. For example, check out the plethora of landing pages for “Manchester, NY” at <https://training.certstaff.com/location/521/Manchester-New-Hampshire> and for Buffalo, NY at <https://training.certstaff.com/location/118/Buffalo-New-York>. It’s as if a staff of elves did a massive cookie-cutter content job on every city in America for every possible combination of software training, isn’t it?

While currently successful, this tactic might set up a company up to be penalized and completely removed from Google. Be careful! Less is more! Yet, it’s working for certstaff.com. Try a search for “Fort Lauderdale JavaScript training,” and you’ll find them in position #1 on Google. Ditto for “Unix classes Oklahoma City” and so on and so forth.

## »» DELIVERABLE: A LANDING PAGE LIST

Inventory your existing or to-be-created landing pages to reflect your major keyword patterns as described in your **keyword worksheet**. Using the “website structure worksheet” in combination with your **keyword worksheet**, create a list of your high-priority landing pages. Each page will then be optimized via page tags and ultimately “one-click” from the homepage, using a keyword-heavy syntax. I recommend a tab on your keyword worksheet that identifies no more than ten SEO-friendly landing pages for your website. Commonly, you’ll have:

**Homepage:** the basic “themes” of the website.

**Landing page #1** reflecting core content / offering (e.g., Unix Classes and Training)

**Landing page #2** reflecting content / offering (e.g., Javascript Training)

**Geo Landing Pages**, e.g. – one for “Oklahoma City” and one for “Fort Lauderdale,” that is your “key” cities (if you’re a local business).

**Blog -**

**Blog-oriented micro pages** as in “What is the Best Way to Learn Salesforce” or “How Can I Understand Microsoft Project” (see: <https://training.certstaff.com/certstaffix/Blog.asp>).

## » WRITE A KEYWORD-HEAVY FOOTER

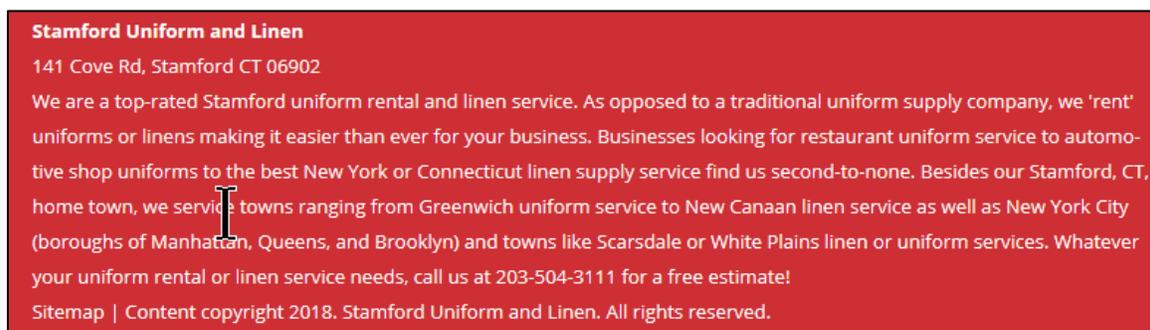
A second tactic I recommend is to write a **keyword-heavy footer**. Take a look at Progressive.com, scroll to the bottom, and check out their footer. Notice how the footer has direct links to major pages, all around the phrase “insurance,” as in “motorcycle insurance.” Or, take a look at my site <https://www.jasonmcdonald.org/> or <https://www.healthypawspetinsurance.com/>. Again, scroll to the bottom and see that target SEO keywords have been embedded in the footer with direct links to landing

pages. Or take a look at Attorney Sand's website at <http://jmlinks.com/13q>, and again, you'll see a keyword-heavy footer.

Here's a screenshot of the Healthy Paws Insurance footer, with “one-click” links to keyword-specific landing pages for “dog insurance” and “cat insurance”:



And here's one for Stamford Linen:



In both cases, there are keyword-focused links from the footer to the more important landing pages.

Your keyword footer should be short, well-written, and contain only your most important keywords. Link FROM the keyword footer TO your target landing pages. The footer increases the site-wide density of your website for your target keywords and allows for “link sculpting” – linking around strategic keywords to your key landing pages. Here's another tip. I find the best success writing subject / verb / object footers,

that is, footers that speak in complete sentences vs. just throwing keyword links on the page. I also find that even if the key landing pages are at the top, visible navigation “for humans,” I find the best success when I have a redundant keyword footer “for Google” in the bottom navigation.

Using your Keyword Worksheet and the “landing pages” tab, make sure that as you create new pages for your website as well as blog pages you link FROM these pages TO your landing pages around keyword-specific phrases. Again, do not overdo this. Just as a general rule, cross-link your pages to each other around important keyword phrases.

## » CREATE A BLOG, AND START BLOGGING

Once you have your basic structure of *Home Page* > *Landing Pages* and *Footer* > *Landing Pages*, it’s time to create a blog. Let’s dig into blogs and blogging.

As I have explained, blogs are critical for both SEO, as a good keyword-heavy blog allows you to comment on keywords that matter to you and your customer. In terms of social media marketing, a blog gives you a place to put content that is of interest to your human readers and customers (See my *Social Media Marketing Workbook* on Amazon at <http://jmlinks.com/smm> for more on this topic). In this book, however, we are focused solely on using blogs for SEO.

Here's what blogs help you accomplish:

1. A blog allows you to write short SEO-friendly posts on **long-tail keywords**. Take a look at the HealthyPaws blog at <https://www.healthypawspetinsurance.com/blog>. Notice how the company blogs on topics of interest to pet owners, and also optimizes its blog posts on keyword topics such “kittens” at <http://jmlinks.com/54p>. Also, notice how the blog links over to key landing pages, especially those that are product-oriented. Or, take a look at the Synopsys blogs at <https://www.synopsys.com/blogs.html> and notice how that hi-tech company uses its blogs to write engineering articles yet touch on keywords that matter to it such as “4 Key Considerations when Evaluation EDA in the Cloud”

(“EDA,” and “Cloud,” being esoteric keywords important to its industry at <http://jmlinks.com/56q>).

2. A blog gives “freshness” to your website, with Google rewarding sites that have frequent postings. Indeed, I recommend that you automate your homepage so that it constantly rotates your three most recent blog posts onto the homepage as at <https://www.jm-seo.org/>. Scroll down to “News and blogs” to see my most recent three blog posts.
3. A blog allows you to link “up” to your strategic landing pages and pass “freshness” to those landing pages. Your landing pages will not change frequently, but by blogging on related topics, you can communicate to Google that you are fresh and alive. For an example of this, read my blog post on “SEOs, San Francisco, and Eating Your Own Dog Food” at <http://jmlinks.com/38a>.

We’ll revisit blogs in Chapter 4.1 on content, as they are that important. But in terms of website structure, realize that having a blog and posting SEO-friendly, keyword-heavy content to your blog on a regular basis is a “must” for success at search engine optimization. I recommend you commit to at least **four blog posts per month** on your keyword themes.

## » LEVERAGE THE HOMEPAGE FOR ONE CLICK LINKS

Google interprets your homepage as the most powerful page on your website, and as we saw in the Page Tags Chapter, you want to have lots of keyword-heavy text on the homepage. In addition, you should embed our most important keywords into the homepage TITLE tag. Beyond that, you should leverage your homepage as a “one-click” gateway to your landing pages. It’s as if your HTML communicated this message to Google:

Home Page > One Click to Landing Pages = *Hey Google! These keywords are important to us!*

Google also looks at the directory structure, namely the presence of keywords in URLs and how “far” those URLs are from the homepage or “root” directory. So, in addition to naming your directories and files after your keyword families and high-priority keywords, and placing “one-click” links from your homepage, create a directory structure that is “**shallow**” or “**flat**.”

*http://www.yourcompany.com/medical-malpractice/sue-doctors.html* (2nd level)

is seen by Google as “more important” than

*http://www.yourcompany.com/1/files/new/medical-malpractice/sue-doctors.html* (5th level)

Thirdly, your homepage needs to communicate “freshness” to Google by having at least three *fresh* press releases and/or three new blog posts. Having new, fresh content that is “one-click” from the homepage signals to Google that your website is alive and updated (vs. a stagnant site that might be out of business), so it’s a best practice to rotate press releases and/or blog posts through the homepage as “one-click” links.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on SEO-friendly homepages at <http://jmlinks.com/18g>.

## » **BE MOBILE-FRIENDLY, FAST, AND SECURE**

For the past few years, Google has emphatically trumpeted the “mobile revolution.” Most searches now occur on mobile devices, and Google has declared itself a “**mobile-first**” company. You can check whether your website is “mobile-friendly” using their Mobile-friendly Testing Tool at <http://jmlinks.com/56r>.

Second, Google wants your website to be fast. This means a fast hosting plan. This means an optimized website experience on a platform such as WordPress. And this

means implementing every other option to speed up your website. You can check how fast your website is using a tool such as the Google Pagespeed Tool at <http://jmlinks.com/56s>.

Third, as for **security**, Google is promoting the transition from *http* to *https* (secure). A site like the JM Internet Group (<https://www.jm-seo.org/>) is secure and marked by *https*; a site like the JM Links Website (<http://jmlinks.com/>) is not secure and marked by *http*. (The “s” stands for *secure* or *encrypted*). All things being equal, the *https* sites may begin to outperform non-secure *http* sites (non-encrypted).

The bottom line is a) your website must be **mobile-friendly**, b) your website must be **fast** to respond, and c) your website must be **secure** or “https.” These are mandatory requirements for success at SEO, so speak to your resident computer nerd and get them done.

## » JOIN GOOGLE (AND BING) WEBMASTER TOOLS

Google rewards websites that make its job easier! Set up sitemaps for Google (and Bing), and participate in their official programs for Webmasters. Sign up for Google Search Console (<http://jmlinks.com/54q>) as well as Bing Webmaster tools (<http://jmlinks.com/6d>). Then follow the steps below to alert Google to your Google-friendly files as follows.

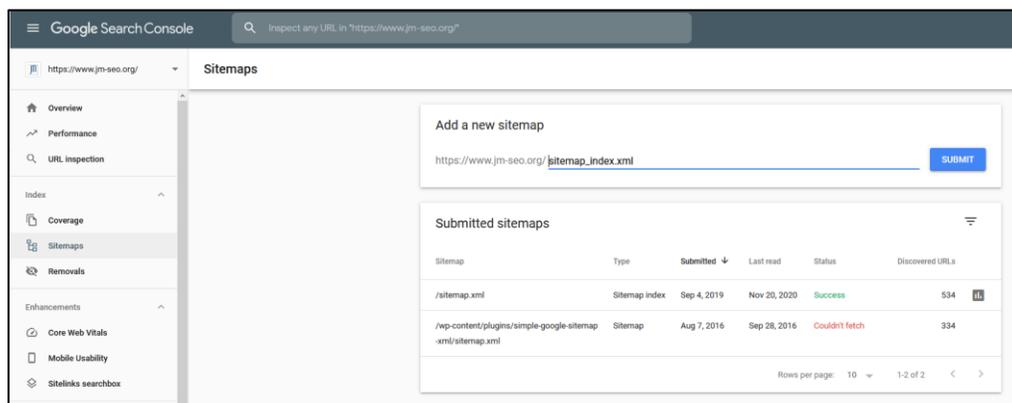
First, create an **HTML sitemap** that makes it easy for a search engine spider to go from Page 1 to Page 2 to Page 3 of your website. If you use JavaScript / CSS pulldowns for navigation, your HTML sitemap is a critical alternative path for Google to index your website. WordPress has many nifty plugins that will create an HTML sitemap for you; just search for “HTML sitemap” via the WordPress plugin search feature. If you’re using Squarespace, Wix, or some other CMS system, ask your vendor how to create an HTML sitemap. You can check out my sitemap at <https://www.jm-seo.org/sitemap/>. The purpose of this page is to allow the GoogleBot to go from the homepage to the sitemap and from the sitemap to each and every page on the website. Think of it as an “insurance policy” so that you do not end up with any “orphan” or “non-indexed” pages. You can also check your indexing by using the site: command on google as in [site:jm-seo.org](http://site:jm-seo.org) to verify that Google is indexing all pages on your website. You can see this live at <http://jmlinks.com/51p>. You can also verify whether an

individual page has been indexed by typing in *site:URL* on Google as in *site:https://www.jm-seo.org/books/* to see whether <https://www.jm-seo.org/books/> in the Google index. You can check this out at <http://jmlinks.com/51q>.

Second, use a free tool such as the one at <http://jmlinks.com/6e> or a WordPress XML sitemap plug-in to create your **XML sitemap**. Note that while an HTML sitemap is visible on the website for both Google and humans, an XML sitemap is visible **only** to Google. Think of your XML sitemap as yet another redundant insurance policy to ensure that all pages of your website are indexed by Google. It should also be referenced in your robots.txt file if possible. If you are using WordPress, the Yoast Plug-in for WordPress will create an XML sitemap for free. Inside of WordPress, click on *Yoast*, click on *Features* and then scroll down to XML sitemap and enable it. Once enabled, click on ‘See the XML sitemap’ to verify that it is present. Here’s a screenshot:



You can see an example at [https://www.jm-seo.org/sitemap\\_index.xml](https://www.jm-seo.org/sitemap_index.xml). Once you’ve done this, then submit your XML sitemap to Google Search Console. Here’s a screenshot of that:

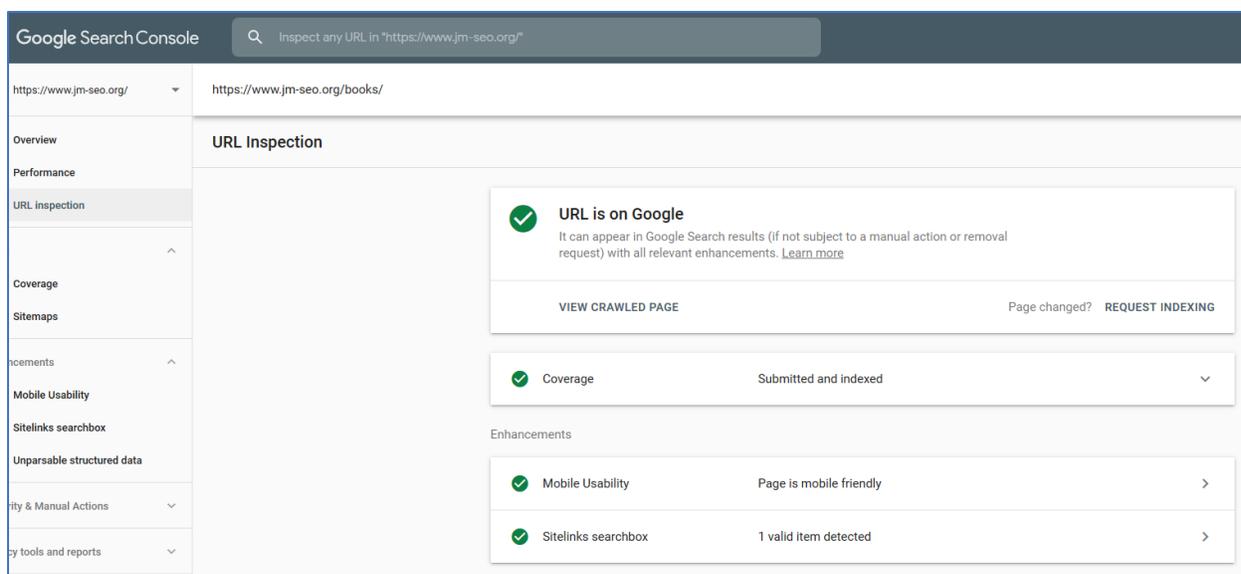


Third, create a robots.txt file that points to your XML sitemap. (Note: if you are using WordPress, just search popular plugins for XML sitemaps and robots.txt functionality). Test your *robots.txt* file to verify that Google can easily index your website. You can view mine at <https://www.jm-seo.org/robots.txt>. If you submit your sitemap to Google Search Console directly, it's not necessary to reference it in your robots.txt file though it is preferred. You can test your robots.txt file via Google's robots.txt tester tool at <http://jmlinks.com/51r>.

At the end of this process, you should have a) an HTML sitemap visible in the footer, b) an XML sitemap, c) a robots.txt file, and d) verification in Google Search Console that it has indexed your XML sitemap. You should have joined Google Search Console and Bing webmaster tools as well, as both of those services will provide other feedback on the SEO health of your website (discussed later in the Chapter on Metrics).

## URL Inspection via Google Search Console

Another feature available in the Google search console is "URL inspection." This is a fancy way of asking Google to index a specific page or URL on your site. When you launch a new website, dramatically change the content of an existing website, or have a specific new page that you want to be indexed, fast, this is a good way to let Google know to reindex a URL or your entire website. To access this feature, log in to Google Search Console. Then click on "URL inspection" on the far left. Enter a URL in the box at the top of the screen and press enter. This then returns a response screen. Here's a screenshot:



To request re-indexing, simply click on “REQUEST INDEXING” on the far bottom right. One trick to get Google to reindex your entire site is to submit / resubmit your HTML sitemap page.

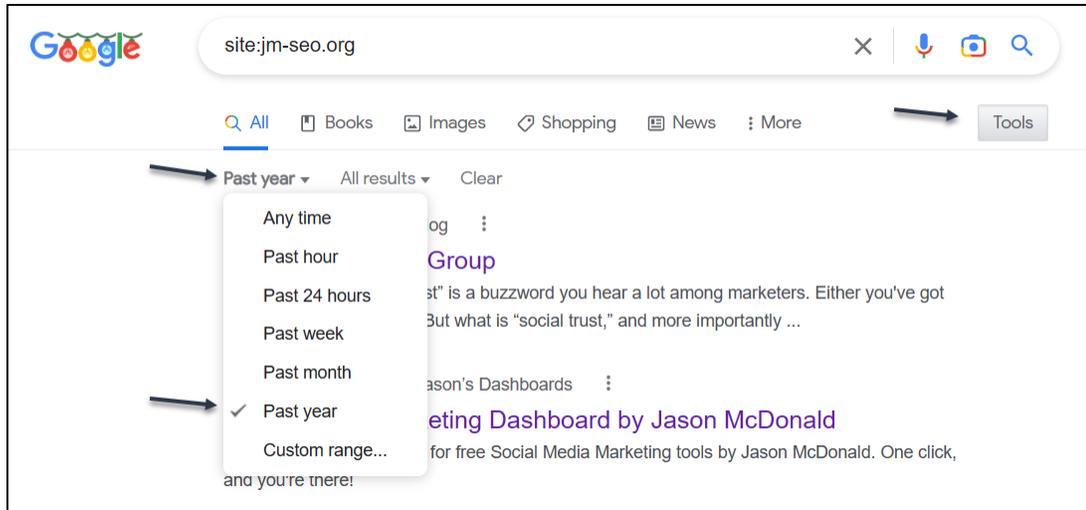
This feature is also useful for getting a new blog post indexed. First, write a new blog post. Second, log in to Google Search Console, and submit your new URL to Google. This accelerates the indexing of a timely post to your blog.

To find out if content is indexed, use the *site:* command on Google. Enter a URL of your website after *site:* (no space) on Google. On Google, this can be:

**Your entire website** as in *site:jm-seo.org*

**A specific page** as in *site: https://www.jm-seo.org/2022/09/what-is-a-hashtag/*

**Pages by a specific time frame** by using *site: jm-seo.org*, then “tools” on the top right of Google, and then a time horizon such as “last month” or “last year.” Here’s a screenshot:



In this way, you can use regular Google to find out what’s indexed and use Search Console to submit or resubmit content so that Google indexes it. Once something is indexed it has a chance to rank; if it is not indexed (NO MATTER HOW GOOD IT IS), it obviously cannot rank!

### Set a Preferred Domain via Your Web Host

You should also set a “preferred” domain at the website hosting level, meaning choose one and only one format for your website as in:

**<https://www.jm-seo.org/>** “preferred domain”

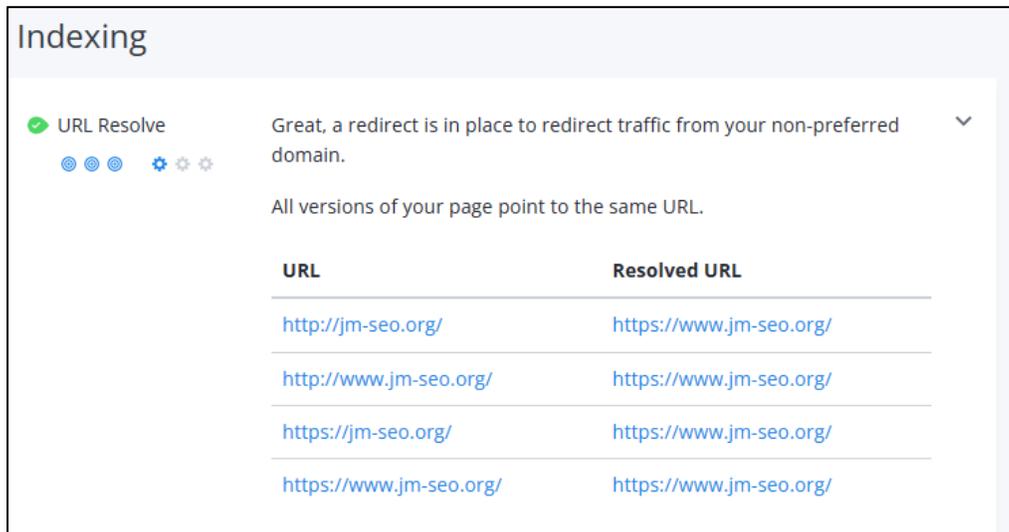
**[https://jm-seo.org](https://jm-seo.org/)** redirects to **<https://www.jm-seo.org/>**

**[http://www.jm-seo.org](http://www.jm-seo.org/)** redirects to **<https://www.jm-seo.org/>**

**[http://jm-seo.org](http://jm-seo.org/)** redirects to **<https://www.jm-seo.org/>**.

See the Google help article on this at **<http://jmlinks.com/51s>**. The magic word here is the “htaccess” file, which you can read about at **<http://jmlinks.com/6f>**. Generally, I’d ask your resident computer nerd or the tech support at your web hosting company

to make sure one, and only one, format is in use. You can use the WooRank Chrome Plugin to check your redirects. Just visit your website, and click on the WooRank Chrome Plugin (which you should have already installed). Then scroll down to indexing. Here's a screenshot for [jm-seo.org](http://jm-seo.org):



Next, take your domain as in **jm-seo.org** and search on Google using the *site:* command as in *site:jm-seo.org*. Verify that all the results returned are to your one, and only one, preferred version.

Thus, my website is **<https://www.jm-seo.org/>** not **[https://jm-seo.org](https://jm-seo.org/)**, not **[http://www.jm-seo.org](http://www.jm-seo.org/)** and not **[http://jm-seo.org](http://jm-seo.org/)**. They all “resolve” to the one, and only, format, which is **<https://www.jm-seo.org/>**. Your site needs to be the same, meaning it must be *https* (not *http*) and it can be either the “www” version or the “non www” version. There is no difference between those two, but you need one, and only one. If your site is resolving in multiple ways, have your resident computer nerd fix it so that you have one, and only one, format for your website. This is done via the .htaccess file, *#nerdalert*.

## Other Features in Search Console

There are some other features of value in Search Console. Scrolling down the left menu in Google Search Console, let me point out the following:

**Mobile Usability.** Google will let you know how “mobile friendly” your website is.

**Security and Manual Actions.** Google will let you know if you’ve been hacked and/or if they’re penalizing you for naughty SEO behavior.

**Legacy Tools and Reports.** Older but still-existing tools are located here, such as International Targeting (used to set your country preference), Removals, Crawl Stats, Messages, URL parameters, and a link to Web tools. One of the most valuable is the “Structured Data Markup Helper” at <http://jmlinks.com/51t>, which will help you point and click your way to JSON-LD structured markup such as that for a local business.

**Links.** This very important data point tells you who links to you on the Web, and which links Google has discovered.

**Settings.** Click here to find out who is a verified owner and who has administrative access to your Google Search Console account. You can also change your address here as well as learn whether you are being indexed first as a mobile or a desktop site.

You should also link Google Search Console to your Google Analytics account. For the help file, visit <http://jmlinks.com/47j>.

Bing’s Webmaster tools has similar features. In particular, Bing’s information on inbound links to your site and keyword discovery tools are meritorious, as is Bing’s SEO Analyzer, which gives feedback on how SEO-friendly a URL is.

## » DELIVERABLE: A COMPLETED WEBSITE STRUCTURE WORKSHEET

At this point, you have the major components of the Chapter **DELIVERABLE: a website audit** using the “website structure worksheet,” namely:

1. **Your homepage.** Optimize your Home Page TITLE tag, META DESCRIPTION tag, IMG ALT’s, and visible text against your target keywords. Link down to your key landing pages.
2. **Your target landing pages.** These are your product or service pages that match common keyword searches your customers do on Google. Inventory the ones that you have as well as the ones that you need to create, and then outline the SEO-friendly content you will write (or rewrite) and weave into the correct tag structure.
  - a. **Your city-specific landing pages** (if applicable). If you are a local business, create city-specific landing pages. Just don’t overdo this!
3. **Create a Keyword Footer.** Write a short paragraph with keyword-optimized links to your key landing pages.
4. **Your Blog.** Set up a blog and start to blog on your keywords.
5. **Your URL structure.** Avoid parameter (numeric, special character) based URLs in favor of keyword-heavy URLs, and build a “shallow” website organization. Ditto for your image files; name them after your target keywords.
6. **Your Google-Friendly Files.** Make sure you’ve signed up for Google (and Bing) webmaster tools and Google Analytics, including an HTML sitemap and robots.txt file.
7. **Participate in Google (and Bing) Webmaster Tools.** You should have registered for Webmaster Tools and crossed your t’s and dotted your i’s in terms of sitemaps (both XML and HTML) and preferred domain.

**DELIVERABLE.** Complete the “website structure worksheet.” For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “Website Structure Worksheet.”

## »» CHECKLIST: WEBSITE STRUCTURE ACTION ITEMS

Test your knowledge of website organization! Take the *Website Structure quiz* at <http://jmlinks.com/qzws>. Next, here are your structure **Action Items**:

- Define**, based on your keyword worksheet, your 3-10 SEO landing pages.
  - If appropriate, create *localized landing pages* but make sure that they have useful content for humans (!). Do not overdo this!
- Organize your **website structure** from the Home Page to the key landing pages to the blog; write a keyword footer.
  - Make sure you have **“one-click” links** to the landing pages from the Home Page.
  - Make sure you have **“one-click” links** to the landing pages from the keyword footer.
- Set up a blog and start blogging (more in the next Chapter).
- Verify that you have *non-parameter URLs* and that your URLs are keyword heavy.
- Verify that you are mobile-friendly (“responsive”) and fast.
  - Silo or “link sculpt” to/from your key landing pages based on keyword themes
  - Link out to a few key industry-specific websites.
- Set up and join Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools; submit your XML sitemap to both.

Check out the **free tools**! Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Website Structure Tools* for my favorite free tools for website organization. Just visit <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>.



# 4.1

## CONTENT SEO

In **Step #1**, you defined your goals; in **Step #2**, you identified your keywords; and in **Step #3**, you structured your pages and website to talk to Google about your target keywords. In **Step #4**, you begin to populate your SEO-friendly website with keyword-heavy content.

*Content, after all, is king.*

But let's be clear. Just throwing content up on your website willy-nilly won't help your SEO! Why? Well, for one, we've already learned that *well-structured content* (SEO-friendly page tags, SEO-friendly website structure) is critical for success at SEO. For two, that content needs to be well-written and include your keywords in high density. And, for three, Google increasingly looks at not only grammar and related words but also whether the human user actually finds it interesting. Thus, you need to write content that's good for Google **AND** good for humans. Google "AI" ("Artificial Intelligence") is increasingly smart at identifying the "best" content vis-à-vis a search query.

In **Step #4**, we will expand on this by creating an **SEO Content Marketing Strategy** ("Content SEO" for short) built upon your keyword targets.

**Content SEO** is all about creating web pages that *match* Google search *queries* with compelling, relevant *content*, be that on a specific web page, a press release, or a blog post. **Content SEO** is all about creating an ongoing "content marketing machine" (*daily, weekly, monthly content*) that produces compelling SEO-friendly content for your website.

**Let's get started!**

## TO-DO LIST:

- » Reject the False Content Dichotomy
- » Identify Keyword Themes
- » Create a Content Map
- » Make Google AI Work for You
- » Create a Content Marketing Plan
- »» Checklist: Content Action Items
- »» Deliverable: A Content Marketing Plan

## » REJECT THE FALSE CONTENT DICHOTOMY

Allow me to get up on my soapbox here for a moment. As you've read this book so far, you've surely realized that I make a big deal about **keywords**. I strongly advocate that you research your keywords and that you identify five to ten core transactional keywords for your website. I also recommend, as we shall see in more detail in a moment, that you focus on keyword families or clusters of keywords, including educational search queries, especially for your blog.

*SEO stands or falls, in my view, with keywords.*

However, you may read on the blogosphere that Google has “moved beyond” keywords and that Google AI can “figure out” what you mean (or what the searcher's intent is). As a good teacher, I want to expose you to this newer, sexier, and easier theory of how to succeed at SEO: just write great content for Google and let Google do the rest. It goes under the ruse of “content marketing,” and it's wrong, or at least not completely right.

In this view, you can abandon worrying about keywords (and about your rank on keyword queries as well). You can just write “for humans” and not worry about Google,

SEO, and the tried-and-true methodologies of researching keywords, inserting keywords into the proper HTML tags, writing keyword-heavy text, and yet not overdoing it in the age of Google Panda. There are many gurus who follow this new thinking. Well, like there was the “New Math,” there’s the “New SEO.” (And like the “New Math” or the “New Coke,” I don’t think this is going to end well).

First and foremost, this idea of writing just “great content for Google” is based on a **false dichotomy**, a false choice. Either you write for Google, or you write for humans, either you embed your keywords in HTML tags, or you write for Google, and so on and so forth. In my humble opinion, you can do *both*, and you *should* do *both*. It’s a “false choice” to think you can’t research keywords and yet write great content or that you shouldn’t pay attention to the keywords people search for and write content accordingly. In addition, how do you know what is “great” content for humans? You can’t just use your own experience. Don’t you need tools? (As we shall see, there are tools and methodologies that use Google to help you identify winning content).

Furthermore, SEO is an endeavor that can be measured. Do some searches that matter to you. Look at the top three winning results. Check to see if they have placed those keywords into key tags and written content that at the very least spits back the keyword phrase to Google. Once you’ve realized you are writing a “both/and” story, one for Google and one for humans, you’re ready to dig into the new “content marketing.”

## » IDENTIFY KEYWORD THEMES

Every successful website has keyword **themes**, just as every successful company or organization has a **focus**. You don’t produce *everything*, nor do your target searchers search Google for *everything*. You **focus**, and they **focus**. If you are Safe Harbor CPAs (<https://www.safeharborcpa.com/>), a CPA firm in San Francisco, for example, your target customers search Google for things like “San Francisco CPA Firms,” “Business CPAs in San Francisco, CA,” or keyword-specific searches such as “CPA Firm for IRS Audit Defense in SF,” or “FBAR Tax Issues.” Guess what? Safe Harbor CPAs has matching content on its website for each of those queries, including an active blog, and that’s no accident!

If you are a Houston probate attorney, you’ll need lots of content about “Houston” and about “probate” plus related terms like estate planning, guardianships, and wills.

Take a look at <http://www.fordbergner.com/>, and – guess what – that site has well-optimized content, including an up-to-date blog, on exactly those keyword themes.

Both sites also have lots of content on their blogs about “adjacent” or “educational” keywords as contrasted with more purely transactional keywords. If you take a look at the Bergner blog, for example, you’ll see blog headlines such as:

*What to do with an IRA when estate planning*

*What Rights Do You Have as a Beneficiary?*

*Estate Planning: Tips To Pass on the Family Farm*

*Not Every State Handles Guardianships as Well as Texas*

etc.

If **keyword discovery** is about organizing your SEO strategy around keyword themes, then **content SEO**, in turn, is about creating a strategy to produce the type of content that “matches” your keyword themes on an ongoing basis.

## MATCH CONTENT TO SEARCH QUERIES

The first step is to match your keyword themes as identified on your keyword worksheet with content that needs to be produced. Among the most common themes are:

**Branded or Navigational Searches.** These are searches in which customers already know your company and simply use Google to find you quickly. In the example of Safe Harbor CPAs, a branded Google search is literally “Safe Harbor CPAs,” while for Ford Bergner Law Firm, it is “Ford Bergner.” **Matching content:** your “about you” page on the website.

**Reputational Searches.** Customers often research reviews about a company, product, or service online before making that final decision to make a purchase. Google your company name plus “reviews” and make sure that what they see about your company is positive; you’ll be creating and encouraging content to proliferate positive content about your company’s reputation. **Matching content:** people don’t search for *testimonials* about a business; they search for *reviews*. So rename your *testimonials* page on your website to *reviews* for better SEO. Also, claim and optimize your company profiles on various reviews sites like Google, Yelp, CitySearch, Judy’s Book, etc., and encourage happy customers to write reviews.

**Anchor Searches.** These are searches in which a core customer *need* matches a core *product or service*. In the example of Safe Harbor CPAs, an anchor search would be “San Francisco CPA Firms” or “Tax Preparation San Francisco.” For a large company like Progressive Insurance, the anchor searches are “Auto Insurance” or “Motorcycle Insurance.” **Matching content:** your landing pages.

**Educational Anchor Pages.** Besides transactional keyword searches, there are often common and repeated “educational searches” for which people want long-form content. An example would be an explanation of the difference between *follicular unit extraction* and *follicular unit transplantation* as techniques for hair transplants. Or another example would be an explanation of *how to contest a will under Oklahoma law*. **Matching content:** FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) documents, eBooks, and long-form blog posts.

**Keyword Specific Searches / Long Tail.** Searches that are usually (but not always) long-tail searches (multiple search keywords) and reflect a very focused customer need or educational query. For example, “How to defend against an IRS audit?” or “Rights and responsibilities of a trustee in Texas” vs. just “CPA Firm” or “Probate attorney.” **Matching content:** blog posts.

**Keyword Specific Searches / Micro Searches.** Short but micro-focused search queries such as “Tag Heuer Repair,” or “Breitling Repair,” or “AdWords Coupons.” These are short but very specific search queries. **Matching content:** blog posts or micro landing pages as well as “city-specific” landing pages.

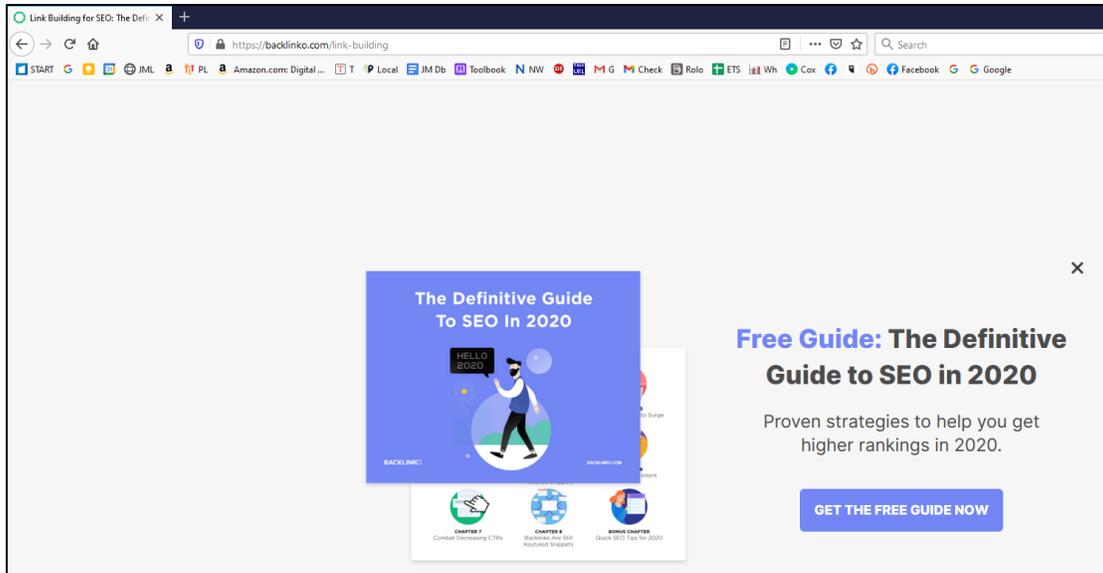
**News and Trending Searches.** These are searches reflecting industry news, trends, and buzz. For example, with recent IRS initiatives to crack down on overseas assets, a search such as “FBAR” reflects an awareness of foreign asset disclosure requirements. Similarly, if you were a networking company, growing awareness of computer security would make blog posts on “cybersecurity” a good bet to attract interested customers. **Matching content:** blog posts, press releases, and video summaries (with matching YouTube videos)

These are not the only types of keyword queries and matching content that might exist; they are just the most common. Your **TO-DO** here is to track trending topics and blog on them quickly to “get ahead” of the news cycle. Use tools like Google Alerts (<https://www.google.com/alerts>), Feedly (<https://feedly.com>), and Buzzsumo (<http://www.buzzsumo.com>) to monitor trending topics in your industry.

## Evergreen Content and Link-bait Content

Many SEO content experts also distinguish between *evergreen* keywords (keywords that are always valuable, such as “CPA San Francisco”) vs. *time-sensitive* content (such as “2023 Tax Changes”). And don’t forget the difference between *educational* search queries and *transactional* search queries (“knee pain” vs. “best knee surgeon in San Francisco”). Finally, there is *link bait* content (such as infographics or tutorial posts) designed to attract links, and of course, *social media content*, especially content that is designed to be highly shareable on networks like Facebook or Twitter. Brainstorm content that has a long shelf-life and that will attract user interest and inbound links.

Here’s a screenshot from Backlinko (<http://jmlinks.com/18v>) showing an “Evergreen” FAQ on how to build links for SEO:



And here's a long-form post on "How to contest a will in Texas" (<http://jmlinks.com/38d>) from Sheehan Law of Austin, Texas:



Regardless of the target keywords, the basic goal is to map out the types of content that are most relevant to you and your customers and to start a content marketing process that generates highly relevant content on a regular basis.

For your first **TO-DO**, review your **keyword worksheet**, brainstorm your keyword patterns, and group your keyword families into patterns that reflect **branded search**, **reputational search**, **anchor search**, **esoteric search**, **news search**, and other patterns.

### » CREATE A CONTENT MAP

Now that you have your keyword themes, it’s time to brainstorm the types of content you are going to create that will match the relevant keyword theme. Your second **TO-DO** is to create a **content map**. In a sense, you are “reverse engineering” the process of Google search: taking what people search on Google as your **endpoint** and creating the type of content that has a good chance of appearing in Google search results as your **starting point**. Your **content map** will map your keyword themes to the relevant locations on your website.

Here’s a table mapping out how keyword themes are generally reflected on website locations:

KEYWORD THEME	WEBSITE LOCATION	COMMENTS ON CONTENT SEO
Branded Searches	Home Page, About You, Testimonial Pages	Branded search is all about making sure you show up for your own name as well as commonly appended helper words like “reviews.” Make sure that at least some TITLE tags communicate your name, and your “about” page is focused on branded search. Don’t forget branded search for key company employees (JM Internet

		Group vs. Jason McDonald, for example).
Anchor Searches / Transactional Searches	Home Page, Landing Pages, Product Pages (High Level), FAQ documents, eBooks	Anchor or transactional search terms generally reflect your product categories in the format that customers search. Revisit <i>progressive.com</i> , for example, and you'll see how each anchor search query is reflected in a focused <b>landing page</b> . In addition, the site navigation and links are “sculpted” around keywords to pull Google up to the target landing pages. Besides landing pages, FAQ documents, Q&A documents, or infographics can match these anchor keywords.
Very Specific Searches	Product subpages, blog posts.	Your esoteric searches are generally long tail searches, and/or searches for very niche, focused products or services (“micro” searches). These are less competitive than anchor searches and are well served by content on product subpages on an e-commerce website as well as blog posts.
News Searches	Press releases, blog posts	Every industry has news, buzz, and timely topics! The place to put this content is generally either in a press release on your website, and/or a blog post.
Educational Searches	Blog posts, FAQ document, possible eBooks	These are when the potential customer is in “learn mode” as in the “causes of hair loss” rather than

		“Best Hair Transplant Surgeon in Miami.”
--	--	--

For your second **TO-DO**, take your keyword themes and map out where they should be reflected on your website in your **content map** or **content calendar**. I recommend doing this in Excel. Check your rank on Google searches vs. relevant search queries for each type – if you are not on page one or not in the top three positions for a query... you have work to do! If possible, create a content or editorial calendar and divvy up who in your company will be responsible for writing which content. The goal is to make a “content marketing machine” so that you are constantly feeding fresh content to your website and your social media. Think *factory production*, not *William Shakespeare*!

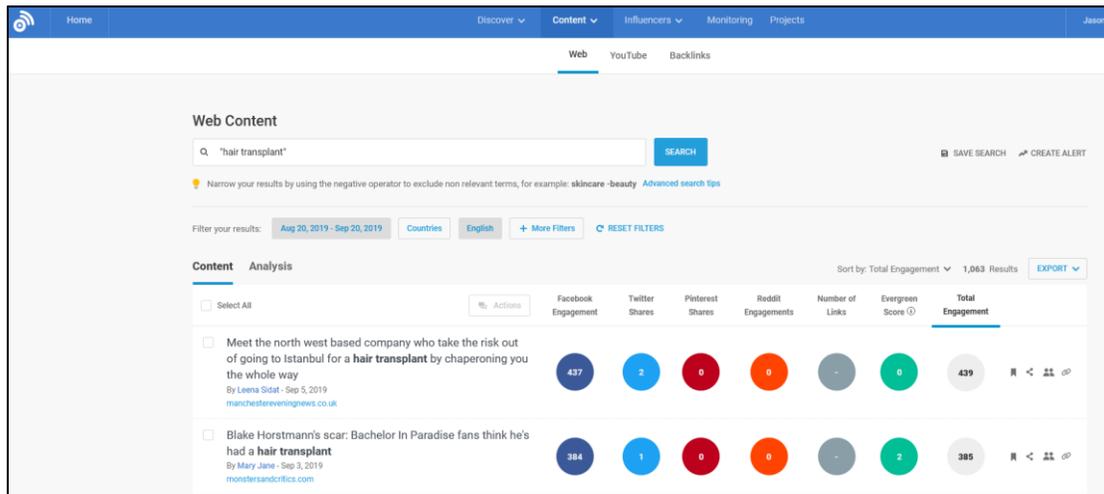
In some cases, you may have *missing* elements (for example, you don’t have a blog or don’t produce press releases); in others, you may have the elements there *already* (product-specific pages, for example), but their content is not SEO-friendly (has poorly defined TITLE tags, content does not reflect logical keyword target, etc.). Regardless, you are mapping your keyword themes to the logical locations on your website with the goal of getting into a rhythm or content creation process of creating SEO-friendly content on a regular basis.

## Social Media & SEO

Google increasingly pays attention to social media, especially shares on Twitter and activity on YouTube. In addition, what people “share” on social media is also often what they “search for” on Google and what they “link to” on their blogs. So keep an eye on social media as you research and build out the content for your website and blog.

What types of content interest your customers? What types of content are they likely to share? Use a tool like Buzzsumo (<http://www.buzzsumo.com/>), input your keywords, and identify the most shared content on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. This tells you what type of content is popular, and therefore you can produce that content yourself.

Here’s a screenshot from Buzzsumo showing the most shared article on “hair transplant” for the past year:



Another useful tool is Google Trends (<http://jmlinks.com/38f>). David Meerman Scott coined the term “newsjacking” to describe a method of first identifying trending topics and second creating a blog post or social content that “newsjacks” that content for your own purposes. Watch his video at <http://jmlinks.com/38g>.

## Click Backs and Google

Finally, related to the trend towards social media is the idea of “click backs.” Google monitors your every move (*we all know that, or at least we should*). They know your behavior on Google, on websites via the Analytics tracking code, via AdWords cookies, via YouTube, and via your Android phone. They know everything. Don’t believe me? Google “Is Google God?” and you’ll end up at the ChurchofGoogle.com at <http://jmlinks.com/47k>.

Google knows when you do a Google search, click over to a website, and quickly “click back.” They know you didn’t find what you wanted, so to speak, and there is evidence that they may penalize sites that have “thin content” as measured by quick or frequent click backs to Google. In this way, and parallel to efforts to monitor social media, Google is already penalizing sites that have low-quality content, content that is just a few paragraphs, and content that is not engaging to users. This trend is likely to get stronger in the future.

Indeed, these intertwined trends – social media and Google monitoring – speak to upping your content marketing game by producing long-form content, content that is truly engaging, and content people love to read. Quality and engagement are metrics not just on social media; they are now metrics for SEO-friendly content as well.

## » MAKE GOOGLE AI WORK FOR YOU

Google sees the future of the Web as “AI,” or “Artificial Intelligence.” This means that an important SEO trend is away from “traditional” SEO, as defined by page tags and links, and towards “content” SEO, as in AI figuring out the “best” response to a user query. As you create content for your website, you can make Google AI work for you.

Here’s how. First, you need to understand how Google AI increasingly responds “intelligently” to user search queries. Take, for example, search queries such as:

*Best cars of 2022*

*How to cook an egg?*

*When is the best time to take social security?*

*Is Apple or Android better?*

Make some key observations:

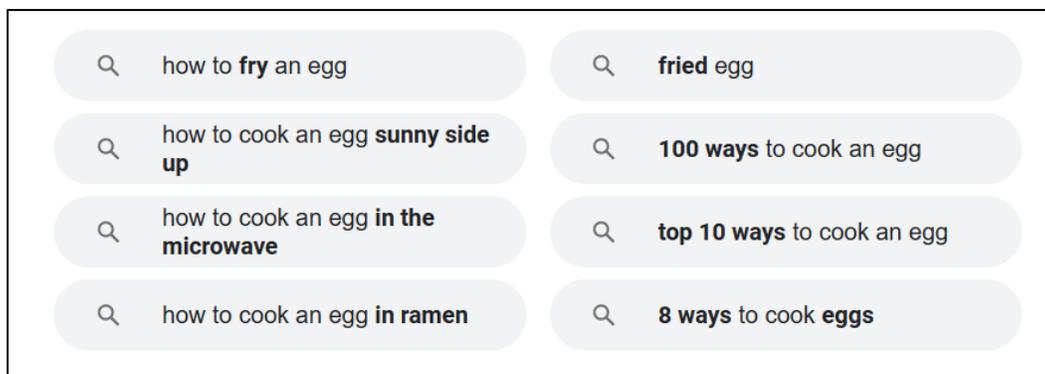
First, the content that ranks well generally “answers” the (implicit) question asked by the searcher. It tends to be rather lengthy, well thought-out and uses header tags, numbers, and bullets to organize information. It also often links “out” to more resources and is on an “authoritative” website. The era of hokey keyword-stuffed content is over, and the new AI era of robust, quality content has arrived.

Digging deeper, you can see evidence of how Google understands the search query. For example, you can see PAAs generally in the middle of the page. Here’s a screenshot for the PAAs for “best cars of 2022:”



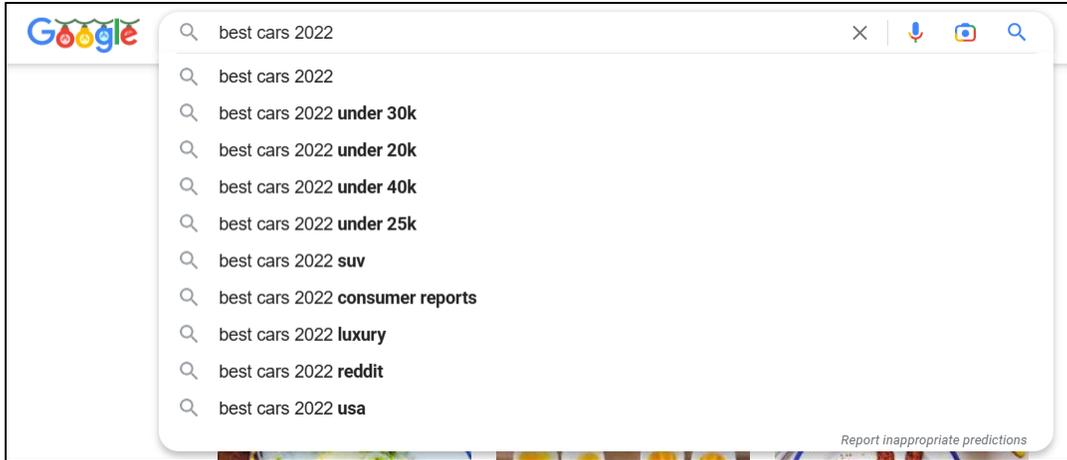
Notice how the PAAs reflect how typical users search for “best cars.” These are Google’s predictions of what searchers want to know before / after / during their quest for the “best cars.” Synonyms like “reliable,” “hottest,” and “brand” populate the PAAs.

Next, you will often see robust “related searches” at the bottom of the search results page. Here’s a screenshot for the related searches for “how to cook an egg”:



Again, notice the synonyms such as “fry” for “cook” and more nuanced searches like “sunny side up.” Google is predicting what a user wants before he or she even asks it.

You can also use Google “Autocomplete” by taking a query such as “best cars 2022” and looking at the suggestions. Here’s a screenshot of that:



And, turning to Google Ads (or third-party) keyword tools, you can see volume, value (costs per click), and related searches. Here’s a screenshot of “social security” in the “grouped view” via the Google Ads Keyword Planner:

<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Group (by relevance)</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	✓ Security Near (8) social security office near me, social security near me, soci...	
<input type="checkbox"/>	✓ Ssa Office (6) ssa office near me, ssa office locator, local ssa office, ssa o...	
<input type="checkbox"/>	✓ Ssi Disability (6) ssi disability, ssi disability qualifications, ssi disability appli...	
<input type="checkbox"/>	✓ Security Application (5) social security disability application, social security applica...	
<input type="checkbox"/>	✓ Security Appointment (7) social security appointment, social security office appoint...	
<input type="checkbox"/>	✓ Ssi Benefits (7) ssi benefits, ssi benefit amount, ssi benefits eligibility, apply...	
<input type="checkbox"/>	✓ Security Maximum (10) maximum social security benefit, maximum social security ...	
<input type="checkbox"/>	✓ Security Income (6) supplemental security income, social security income, soci...	

Here's the deal. Take any search, and Google is literally telling you the “related terms,” “related questions,” and “related search queries.” Turn this around and give Google “what it wants.” Use PAAs, related searches, autocomplete, and relevance groups as a guide to creating Google-friendly content.

## Turn this to Your Advantage

You can turn the AI trend to your advantage when it comes to content creation. By this, I mean not only your blog content but the content on your homepage, landing pages, and other key product or service pages. Here are your steps:

1. Research your **target keywords** as we have already discussed at length. (Embed these in your content).
2. Pay attention to related **PAAs** (People Also Ask) questions that occur. (Answer at least some of them in your content).
3. Pay attention to **Google Autocomplete**. (Consider creating related content and/or weaving in these phrases into your content).
4. Pay attention to **Google “Related Searches.”** (Consider creating related content and/or weaving in these phrases into your content).
5. Within **Google Ads Keyword Planner**, pay attention to “grouped” keywords. (Group your content around a similar structure).

With this pre-research in hand, you create content that “spits back” at Google the “answers” to common PAAs, the “related” search terms from Google Autocomplete, additional landing pages or blog posts on “related searches” and group / interlink your content based on “grouped” keywords. Link “out” to authoritative websites to “show” your website as useful. Position your content (and your website as a whole) as the “best” answer to the user question(s), and this (in combination with “traditional” On Page and Off Page SEO) will get your pages to the top.

## An Example Website Using AI / Semantic SEO

Here's an example website that uses this new type of content SEO: Kenny Perez Law at <https://kennyperezlaw.com/>. Take a look at his homepage, for example, and notice the block of “Questions” and “Answers.” Here's a screenshot:



Notice his robust blog (<https://kennyperezlaw.com/articles/>), which is full of commonly asked questions and answers on personal injury. Notice on specific landing pages such as the page optimized on “Car Accident Attorney” at <https://kennyperezlaw.com/brownsville-car-accident-lawyer/> how the pages have robust outward links, actual information that is topic- and location-specific, etc. Here, for example, is a screenshot of localized information on Brownsville Texas accident sites:

Here are some of the most common accident sites in the county:

- City roads, including E. Harrison Street
- County roads, like Paredes Line Road
- Farm to market roads—which are winding and narrow roads that are unique to Texas—such as FM 511 and FM 803
- U.S. highways, like U.S. 77 and state highways like TX-4
- Interstate highways, including I-2 and I-69E

Mr. Perez’s website is as much an “information” site as it is a site encouraging you to reach out to his team for personal injury issues in the Rio Grande Valley. In summary, it’s leveraging this new type of “AI” content-based SEO and spitting “relevant” content back at Google. The goal is to position the website as much as an “information” site as a transactional website where you can hire a lawyer. It works. The site ranks extremely well for relevant personal injury searches in Brownsville Texas and environs.

## **BECOME THE ANSWER TO THE USER’S (AND GOOGLE’S) QUESTIONS**

Your job is to use Google AI as a discovery mechanism for the type of content that users (and Google) prefer vis-à-vis your content themes. Regurgitate that content as part of your 2023 SEO strategy. Be the answer in a robust way to the question(s) the user is asking.

### **»»» CHECKLIST: CONTENT ACTION ITEMS**

Test your knowledge of content marketing! Take the *content quiz* at <http://jmlinks.com/qzcm>. Next, here are your content marketing **Action Items**:

- ❑ Revisit your **keywords**, looking beyond landing pages to which keywords match which content types as for example, how an “educational search query” can match a blog post or an evergreen FAQ document.
- ❑ Build a **content map** or **content calendar**, laying out the matches between keyword themes or types and content to be produced.
  - ❑ If you haven't already, set up a **blog** on your website. Begin to brainstorm your blog topics and *assign who is going to write what* with respect to your blog.
  - ❑ Assign **content production** to team members, such as who will write which blog posts or which types of anchor or evergreen content.
- ❑ Distinguish among **different types of content** to be produced – namely, homepage, landing pages, blog posts, micro or e-commerce product pages, etc. vs. videos for YouTube vs. eBooks vs. email newsletters. etc.
  - ❑ Research which content tends to be *shared on social media* in your industry with an eye to the “social media” aspect of SEO and content.
  - ❑ Use **Google AI tools** and content as a “window” into the type of content that users and Google want. Spit this content back at Google in a robust, “good for Google” and “good for humans” writing style.

Check out the **free tools!** Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Content* for my favorite free tools for content marketing. Just visit <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>.

## »»» DELIVERABLE: A CONTENT MARKETING PLAN

Now that you have a **content map** of your website vs. your keyword themes on your **keyword worksheet**, you are ready to produce your **DELIVERABLE: a content marketing plan**. Your content marketing plan will consist of these basic phases.

**Phase 1: Quick Fix.** Based on your keyword worksheet, including the content map, conduct an inventory of existing pages. Adjust their TITLE tags, META DESCRIPTION tags, and content to bring that content into alignment with your logical Google searches. I usually also write a “keyword footer” and place it on all website pages to increase keyword density and allow for link sculpting. Don’t forget to optimize the content of that all-important homepage!

**Phase 2: Content Inventory.** Are you missing anything? Often, there will be a very important keyword pattern that has no corresponding landing page, for example. Or your site will not have a blog, or you will have never set up a press release system. Inventory what you are missing and start to prioritize what needs to be done to get that content on your website. Commonly needed elements are:

- **Blog.** I recommend at least four blog posts per month; these can be on easy, man-on-the-street type themes, but you really need to commit to at least four and make sure that they are relevant vis-a-vis your keyword themes.
- **Press Releases.** As discussed in Chapter 4.2, I recommend at least two per month and (if possible), using the 24/7 (<https://www.24-7pressrelease.com/>) and/or EIN Presswire (<https://www.einpresswire.com/>) to syndicate them.
- **Landing Pages.** Make sure that each major search has a corresponding landing page. In addition to your transactional landing pages, make sure that you brainstorm educational searches and create long-form content such as FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) documents. These are great “link bait,” i.e., ways to attract inbound links to your website.
- **AI-Friendly Content.** Consider writing the “ultimate” guide to major topics in your industry, provocative “hot button” issues, and other timely topics. This type of content is great to a) attract links, and b) to acquire customer email addresses and contact information. Create blog posts and larger FAQ content that “answers” the implicit “questions” asked by users through Google.

**Phase 3: Content Creation Process.** Once you have done the Quick Fix to the website and created any missing landing pages, set up a blog, and/or set up a press releases system, you need to create a content creation schedule and process.

This is an assessment of who will do what, when, where, and how to create the type of ongoing content that Google and Web searchers will find attractive. Throughout the process, write both “for humans” and “for Google” and leverage Google’s AI tools to understand the specifics of this type of content.

**WORKSHEETS.** For your **DELIVERABLE**, fill out the “content marketing worksheet,” specifically each phase. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “content marketing worksheet.”





# 4.2

## BLOGGING

Nothing is as easy or as powerful for SEO as blogging! While landing pages reflect your anchor keyword terms, and press releases can build inbound links via syndication, blogging allows you to sculpt content for narrower keyword queries as well as to respond quickly to industry buzz and trends. In addition, frequent blogging - like frequent press releases- sends a powerful signal to Google that your website is “fresh.” Every website should have a blog!

**Let’s get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Why Blog?
- » Make a Blog Calendar
- » Set Up Your Blog for Best SEO
- » Write SEO-friendly Blog Posts
- » Rank for Featured Snippets
- »» Checklist: Blogging Action Items
- »» Deliverables: Blog Calendar and Your First Blog Post

### » WHY BLOG?

Why Blog? Blogging is one of the most powerful, highest return-on-investment (ROI) activities you can engage in after you’ve SEO optimized your homepage and your landing pages. Here’s why. First, an active blog sends out a “freshness” signal to

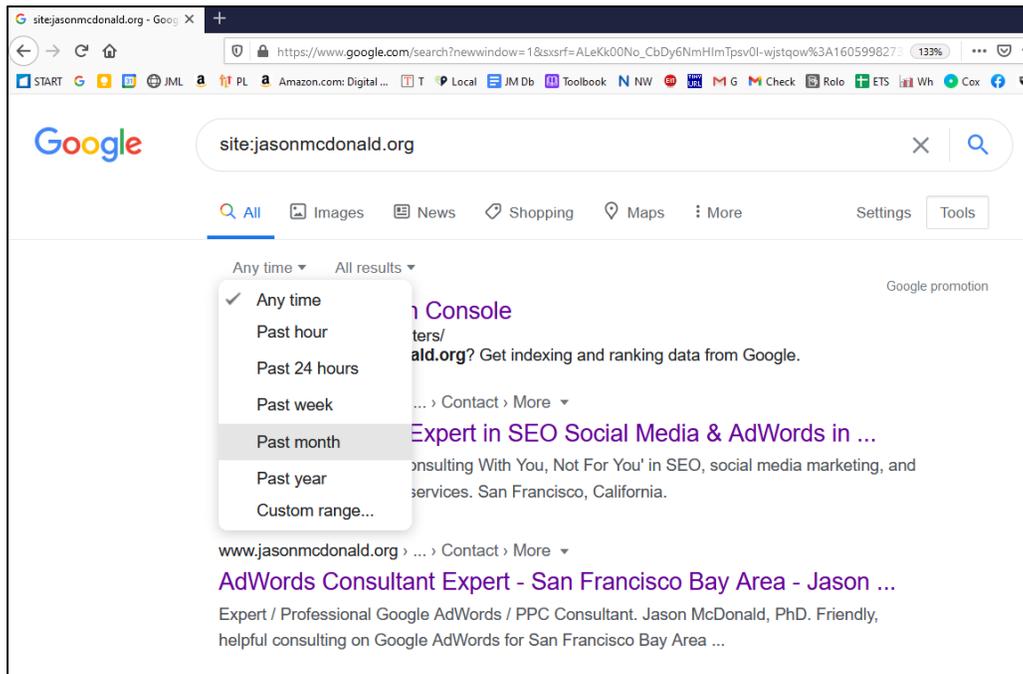
Google, Bing, and Yahoo, saying, “I’m alive, I’m alive, I’m alive.” Google prefers sites that have new, fresh content.

Why? Well, you have to look at the world from Google’s perspective. Google’s goal is to return highly relevant, active websites for any search query. So, if a user searches for a *pizza restaurant in Okmulgee, Oklahoma*, Google has a set of pizza websites to consider. It will choose the one that has optimized for the keywords “Pizza” and “Okmulgee,” plus has active inbound links, plus has many reviews on Google, and – all things being equal – the one with the more active blog. Why? Because Google is concerned that the other pizza restaurant – the one without an active blog – is out of business. If it’s June 3, 2023, and the last blog post on Website A was May 3, 2021, and the last blog post on Website B was June 1, 2023, and the last blog post on Website C was... *well Website C doesn’t even have a blog...* then Website A is the winner (all things being equal).

## **AN ACTIVE BLOG TELLS GOOGLE, “YOU’RE ALIVE!”**

Second, after freshness, a blog allows you to write content on micro or long-tail search keywords. To use our pizza example, the primary keyword might be “Pizza” or “Pizza Okmulgee,” but there may be some searches for “best pizza restaurants in Okmulgee for kids’ birthday parties.” These are *high value, low volume* searches. A quick blog post on how to select the best pizza restaurant in Okmulgee for kids’ birthdays is an easy way to get to the top of Google for these micro or long-tail search phrases. So, an active blog allows you to create a lot of content on varied themes. It costs next to nothing and can be free advertising on long-tail keyword queries. How great is that?

Third, an active blog increases the volume of content on your site. All things being equal, the bigger site will win on Google. If, for example, Pizza restaurant A has ten pages and Pizza restaurant B has one hundred pages, then Pizza restaurant B must be better in Google’s eyes (all other SEO factors being equal). Bigger means better; more content means a more serious website. Use the *site: command* plus your domain to check how many pages you have indexed on Google, and then use the *Tools > Anytime > Past Month* drop downs to find out if you have new content that is being indexed by Google. Here’s a screenshot:



Remember it's *site: **no space** and your domain* as in *site:jasonmcdonald.org* in the Google search bar. To see this in action, visit <http://jmlinks.com/14d>.

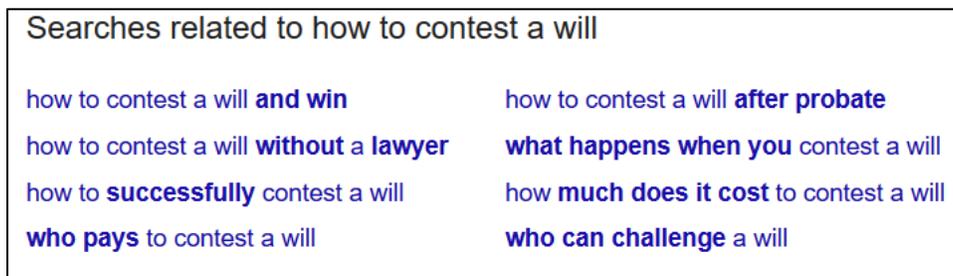
Fourth, a blog allows you to pass link juice up to your landing pages. When you blog on *best pizza restaurant in Okmulgee for kids*, you can link “up” to the landing page for *Pizza* and the landing page for *Okmulgee Pizza* when you use those phrases in your blog and link directly from them, again passing “freshness” and “link juice” up to those landing pages. Finally, a blog (especially long-form blog posts) can act as “link bait.” When you write an interesting, in-depth blog post on an industry topic, especially trending or puzzling topics, people are likely to find it and link to it, thereby attracting links to your website. In addition, people often share blog articles on social media, helping you both for SEO (by getting social mentions of your URLs and website) and social media marketing (by creating sticky, interesting, shareable content that gets your brand in front of more customers).

In summary, you just gotta blog!

## » MAKE A BLOG CALENDAR

As you begin to blog, remember to stick with your keyword themes. Don't blog on just anything – blog on topics that contain your keywords. Stay on topic. A good way to brainstorm topics to blog on is to take a “seed keyword” or phrase like “how to contest a will” and then look at the related searches at the bottom of Google.

Here's a screenshot:



You can also use the PAAs that may appear in the middle of the page for blog ideas. Here's a screenshot of that:



Tools like AHREFS or Answer the Public also give you a list of questions and topics. Between related searches, PAA's, and keyword tools, there's no excuse for writer's block when it comes to blogging!

As an SEO Content strategist, look around your company and identify blog topics as well as other company employees who can contribute to the blog. Unlike press releases, blog posts can be much more informal, opinionated, and quick. So whereas you might generate just two press releases per month, set a goal of at least one blog post per week, if not more. I generally recommend two press releases per month and four blog posts per month as a solid website goal.

## YOU CAN'T REALLY OVERBLOG

Think of Captain Kirk on the Starship Enterprise: “*Captain’s log, Stardate 4.2.51535, Spock and I have beamed down to the planet to investigate. I will check out the beautiful women, and Spock will be taking soil samples.*” Kirk blogged, and blogged, and blogged his way across his five-year mission, and he was pretty shameless. So don’t be shy: blog, blog, blog, blog, blog! You can’t really overblog as long as you write decent content, and if you don’t toot your own horn, who will?

*As long as your blog content is fresh, original, and keyword-heavy, all blog posts will help your SEO. The more, the merrier!*

### A Blog Calendar

Depending on your company size, a blog calendar can help you keep track of possible blog topics and themes. You can also assign the blog posts to different members of your team. Don’t try to do all the blogging yourself.

Here is a sample blog calendar for a hypothetical roofing company in Dallas, TX.

SAMPLE BLOG TOPIC:	WHEN TO POST:
We complete a roofing job.	Write a blog post about each roofing job, when completed, with information on the city where the job was located, the type of roofing material used, and customer reaction. Goal is to help with geotargeted searches.
Our day-to-day in a host city for a job.	Because geographic search terms are important for a roofing company, create city-specific blog posts such as your favorite “taco joint” in the city, or variances in city roofing codes.
Industry trends and events	Any time there is an industry trend, such as a new roofing material, chime in with an opinion. Ditto for any industry events or events in the Dallas, Texas, area.
New website content	Blog about our website, explaining what new content we are creating and why.
Partnership Announcements	Identify potential blog opportunities with our partners.
Industry Awards or Milestones	Any time we win an industry award or cross a milestone (such as the 1000th follower on Twitter), it’s time for a blog post!

You’ll see many similarities between successful SEO blogging and SEO press releases. The difference is one of degree: blogging is quicker, more informal, and more a quantity play vs. the more formal, higher quality status of press releases. Commit to writing four blog posts per month and stick with it.

If you're freaked out about creating this much content, you can go to a site like Fiverr.com and enter "blogging" and easily find lots of decent writers who can write at least a rough draft. Give them a keyword prompt, tell them you want five to seven paragraphs, and then do the final SEO-friendly edits yourself. (I do find that most bloggers don't understand SEO, so it's easier to do the final SEO optimization myself).

## » SET UP YOUR BLOG FOR BEST SEO

The best blog platform by far is WordPress (<http://wordpress.org/>). Ask your web designer and/or ISP to install WordPress on your site. If you are building a new site, use an ISP like GoDaddy that makes WordPress a "one-click" installation. If you are running WordPress, be sure to install the Yoast SEO plugin (<https://yoast.com/>) so that you can easily optimize the blog post TITLE and META DESCRIPTION tags.

And, if you don't have the budget for WordPress, I recommend Google's blogger platform at <http://www.blogger.com/>. Regardless of your platform, follow these basic principles for successful SEO blogging:

**Host your blog on your own site.** Blogging helps with site freshness vis-a-vis Google as well as acts as link bait. So it makes little sense to host your blog on another site. If at all possible, host your blog on your own domain in the subdirectory position as for example, <http://www.company.com/blog>. (Subdirectories are better than subdomains, by the way: *company.com/blog* is better than *blog.company.com*).

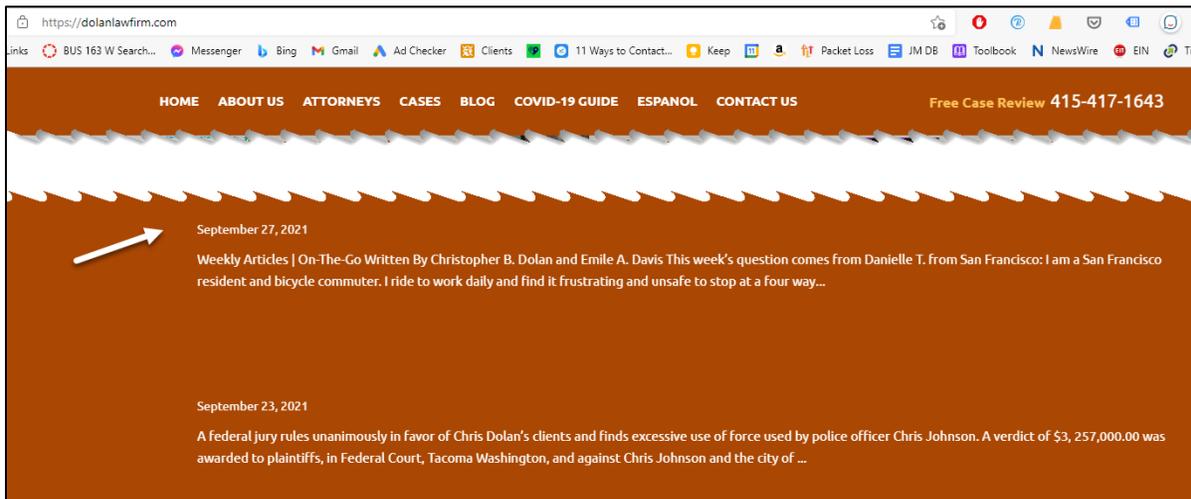
**Check each blog post for good SEO.** As you write a blog post, check to make sure that your blogging platform allows for basic "On Page" SEO: a keyword-heavy TITLE tag, META DESCRIPTION tag, the use of the header family, one image with the alt attribute defined, and keyword-heavy cross-links.

**Make sure your blog allows for keyword-heavy tagging and cross-indexing.** Make sure that your blog allows you to "tag" a post with keywords and that these "tags" act as URL cross-links.

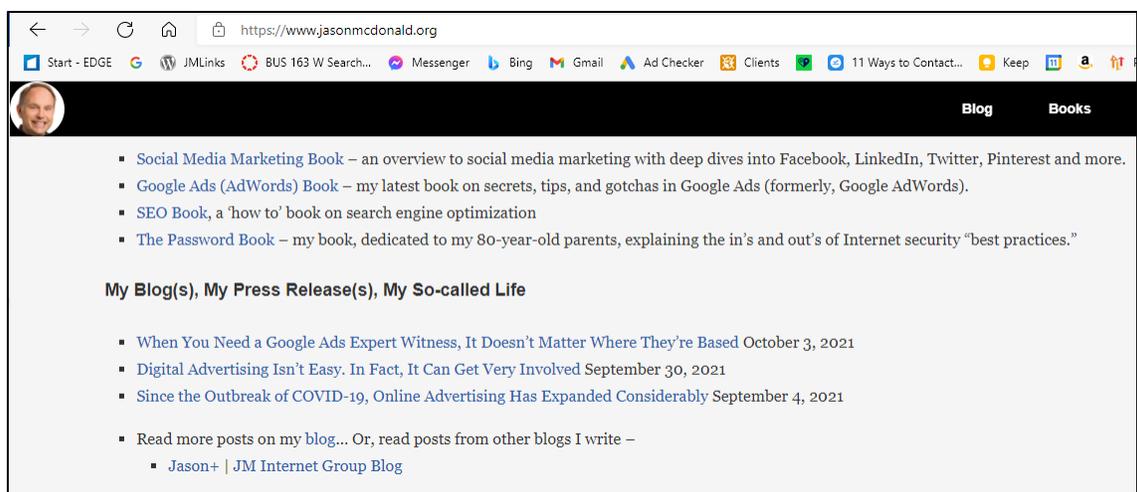
**Verify that your blog URLs are keyword-heavy.** Numeric, parameter-centric URLs are very bad for SEO, so make sure that your blog generates keyword-heavy URLs for each post.

At the homepage level, a best practice is to have “one-click” links from your homepage down to at least three rotating blog posts. You can use the “Display Posts Short Code” plugin in WordPress (<http://jmlinks.com/47n>) to accomplish this easily.

Here’s a screenshot from the homepage of <https://dolanlawfirm.com>, showing new blog posts to their site:



And here’s a screenshot from the homepage of <https://www.jasonmcdonald.org/>, again showing recent blog posts that are “one-click” from the homepage to each post:



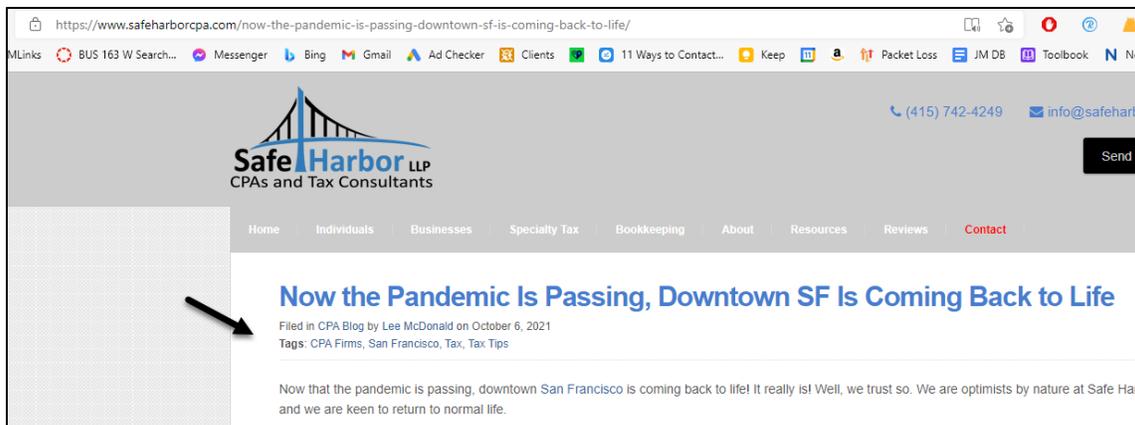
In both cases, the blog posts **freshen** the website, allow for **micro** or **long-tail** keyword targeting, increase the **size** of the website, and give **something to share** on social media.

You just gotta blog!

## Tag Your Blog in WordPress

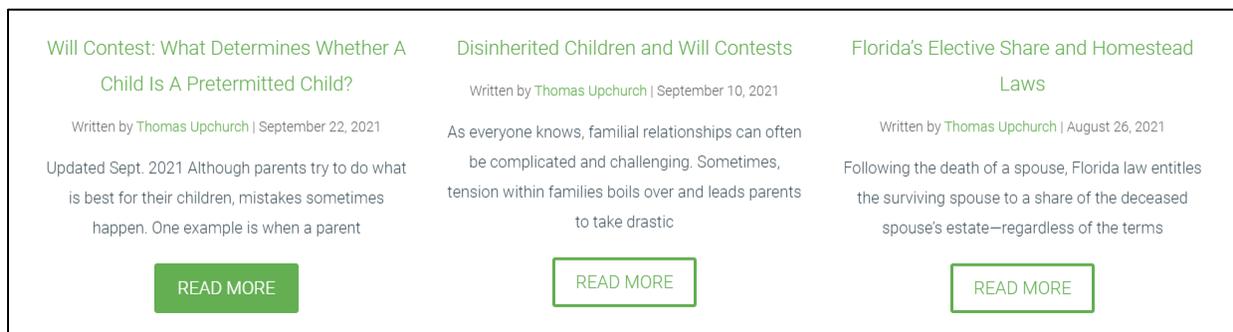
Many people do not correctly “tag” each blog post, yet tagging is incredibly important to SEO-friendly blogging! (Note: I’m talking about WordPress “tags,” not HTML “tags.” Unfortunately, we use the same term for both things). Make sure that your blog tags match your keyword themes, and make sure that when you write a blog post, each post gets tagged.

For example, check out the blog at <https://www.safeharborcpa.com/blogs/>. Click on an individual post, and you can see that each post is “tagged” with both WordPress categories and tags that are keyword-relevant. For example, here’s a screenshot from an October 6, 2021, post entitled, “Now that Pandemic is Passing, Downtown SF is Coming Back to Life:”



And then note that each “category” or “tag” gets its own URL on the site, as for example, <https://www.safeharborcpa.com/tag/san-francisco/>. This means that Google sees a lot of content on relevant keywords both at the “tag” or “category” level and that this content is cross-referenced to each other via WordPress. This symphony of interrelated content helps the site rank for relevant search queries such as “international tax CPA in San Francisco.”

Another example of a really good SEO-friendly blog can be found on Thomas Upchurch Law. Check out his blog at <http://jmlinks.com/14g>. Here’s a screenshot:



Not exactly fun-reading, but it’s all on keyword topics relevant to a Florida probate attorney. Notice how he blogs on his target keyword themes such as “estate planning” and “will contests.” Notice how he has “one-click” links from the homepage to current blog posts. Notice how each blog post is “tagged” with keyword-relevant blogs.

To find good blog examples in your own industry, go to Google and do a search for your keywords, as in “probate” plus “blog” and then browse the top websites. For an example search, visit <http://jmlinks.com/14h>.

## » WRITE SEO-FRIENDLY BLOG POSTS

Blogging is a complementary SEO content strategy to your anchor landing pages, your homepage, your product pages, and your press releases. Whereas anchor landing pages focus on your evergreen anchor keyword terms, your blog can focus on more keyword-specific, timely topics. Blogging is especially useful for posting content that responds to quick industry trends. Here is a summary of the steps toward writing an SEO-friendly blog post:

1. **Identify the target keywords.** A good blog post is laser-focused on a very narrow keyword, so do your keyword research first! Use Ubersuggest.io, Google autocomplete, and the Google Keyword Planner to identify keyword topics and related keywords to your targets.
2. **Follow “On Page” SEO best practices.** Make sure that your post follows all of the “On Page” rules, such as a keyword-heavy TITLE, META description, at least one image with an ALT attribute that contains the target keyword, etc.
3. **Consider an action or purpose.** Have a defined action for each blog post, usually by embedding a link from the blog post “up to” one of your defined anchor landing pages. Another use of blog posts such as “Top Ten Things that Can Go Terribly Wrong at Your Wedding” is link bait or share bait; people will link to informative, provocative, shocking blog posts and/or share them on social media.
4. **Tag your blog post.** Identify keyword themes for your blog that match those of your keyword worksheet and recognize that each blog post is part of a keyword cluster, supporting the entire website’s SEO themes.
5. **Link Up.** Link up from the blog to your key landing pages. If, for example, you write a blog post on “Selecting the Best Kitten for an Apartment,” then link up from that page to your anchor landing page on “cat insurance” around the phrase “cat insurance.” This passes “freshness” from the post to the landing page and helps both to rank on Google.

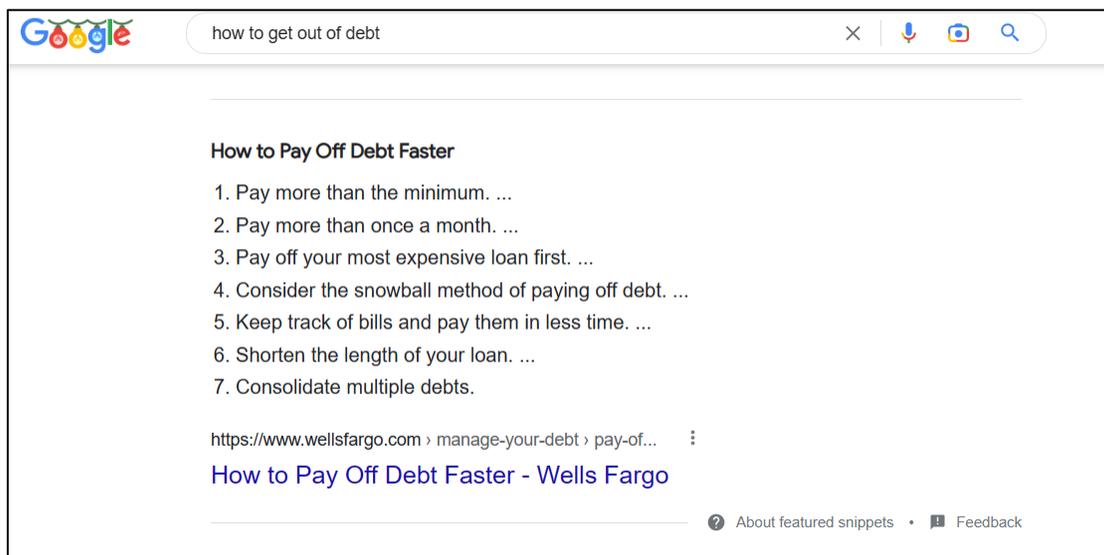
**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on SEO-friendly blogging posts at <http://jmlinks.com/17t>.

For a template on an SEO-friendly blog post, visit <http://jmlinks.com/14e>. For a fun blog topic generator, check out <http://jmlinks.com/14f> or visit my *SEO Dashboard* for more tools for better blogging.

## » RANK FOR FEATURED SNIPPETS

It's no secret that Google is going all out for **voice search**. As Google's own *Google home* begins to compete with Amazon's *Alexa* and Apple's *Siri*, there's a gold rush towards voice searches on the phone and in the home. "Hey Google! How do you tie a tie?" or "Hey Google! How old is Joe Biden?" or "Hey Google! What are the best movies of 2023?" are becoming common searches as we "talk" to computers on our phones and in our homes.

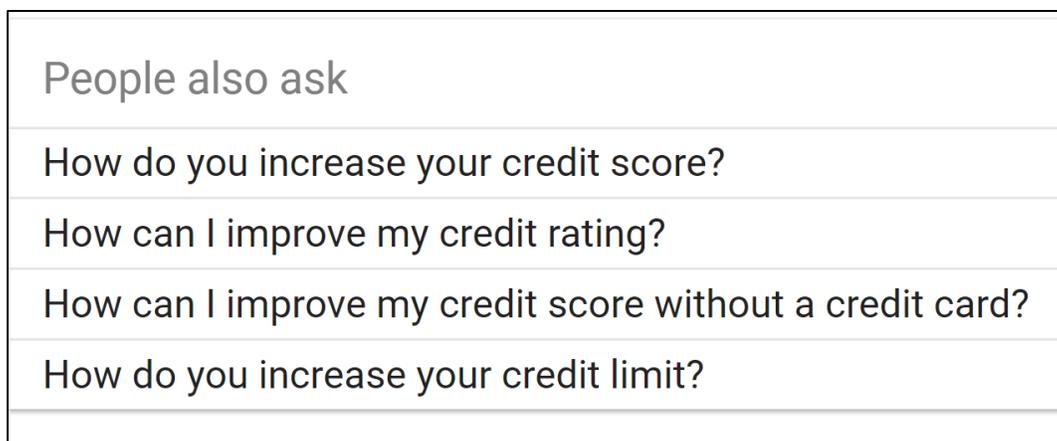
Accordingly, Google has rolled out what are called **featured snippets**. For example, here's a screenshot of what Google responds with to the query, "How to get out of debt:"



This links to <https://www.wellsfargo.com/goals-credit/smarter-credit/manage-your-debt/pay-off-debt-faster/>, which is a well-structured blog post that “answers” the question “How to get out of debt?” This trend toward answers is called “featured snippets.” It is also often called “Answer Boxes,” “Snippet Zero,” etc., and they are prominent text that answers queries that generally occur in the form of a question. Try a few questions from your industry, stating them as questions “as if” a user were “asking Google.” Some examples might be “How to ask a girl out,” or “how to tell if a person is lying,” or “what state has the lowest taxes?”

Featured snippets frequently occur for searches that are *educational* in nature, such as “how to” do something, as well as ratings and reviews, such as “best” of such-and-such as in “best SEO conferences.” They also tend to occur for financial, mathematical, and other types of “requirement” queries such as “what are the best home mortgage rates” or “improve my credit score.” But they occur for transactional queries such as “What are the top-selling cars of 2023?” and so forth.

Related to featured snippets is a subordinate box called “People Also Ask,” or *PAA*s. If you search for “improve my credit score,” for example, you’ll also see a box labeled “People also ask.” Here’s a screenshot:



Each of the PAAs is essentially a featured snippet in its own right, so the rules of ranking are essentially the same (though not the same answer shows for a featured snippet in its own right vs. a PAA to a related snippet!).

## How to Rank for Featured Snippets

It's not easy to rank for a featured snippet, but when you do, you get a lot of traffic from Google. Here are the steps to rank for a featured snippet:

1. Identify **relevant search queries** for your company that are also likely to generate a featured snippet such as “how to,” “best,” or “step-by-step” questions. Pay special attention to those queries that are already generating featured snippets in your industry.
2. **Write and optimize a blog post** vis-à-vis the target featured snippet query, using HTML for numbered or bulleted lists, tables, and other designations that clearly indicate to Google this is “organized” or “step-by-step” content.
  - a. Along the way, “regurgitate” the **question(s)** and **answer(s)** to Google, as in “How do make chicken soup,” you ask? Well, first, you bring the chicken stock to a boil; second, you add in the vegetables.” Imagine you are a Google Home, Alexa, or Siri device that is being asked a question such as “How do you make chicken soup,” and you are “answering” step by step.
3. Use all your **Off Page SEO tactics**, such as mentioning your post on social media, featuring it on your homepage, building external links to it, etc. Conduct an “Off Page” SEO audit and look for opportunities to promote your potential featured snippets.

Don't get discouraged. It's not easy to rank for featured snippets, but it is incredibly valuable. Featured snippets are relatively new, and not everyone even agrees on what factors decide which queries generate them and which factors determine who wins “Position 0,” (“Position Zero”), which is another term for featured snippets. For more information on featured snippets, see <http://jmlinks.com/38k>.

## »» CHECKLIST: BLOGGING ACTION ITEMS

Here are your blog **Action Items**:

- Set up your blog** if you haven't already; I recommend the WordPress platform. Be sure to enable "WordPress tags" so you can "tag" individual posts on your keyword themes.
- Create a blog **content calendar**, laying out the matches between keyword themes or types and blog posts to be produced.
  - Research** which content tends to be *shared on social media* in your industry with an eye to the "social media" aspect of SEO and content.
  - Assign **blog content production** to team members, such as who will write which blog posts and how frequently. Set a goal of at least four blog posts per month.
  - Write each** SEO-friendly **blog post** with an eye to what Google wants (keyword-heavy, SEO-friendly tags, and content) and what humans want (interesting, fun content that answers their needs or questions).
- After you write a blog post, use Google Search Console's "**inspect any URL**" feature to notify Google to index your content. Then, use *site:yourdomain.com/blogpost.html* to verify that your content is being indexed.
- Make sure that your **homepage** has your **three most recent blog posts** on it with "one-click" links down to them and that each blog post links "up" to your target landing pages.
- Try to rank for **featured snippets**. They're the new, new thing!

Check out the **free tools**! Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Blog Tools* for my favorite free tools for blogging. Just visit <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>.

## » **DELIVERABLES: A BLOG CALENDAR AND A SAMPLE BLOG POST**

The **DELIVERABLE** for this Chapter is your blog calendar. This can be as simple as a Word document or Google document that serves as an “idea list” of when to generate a blog post. The goal is to avoid writer’s block and get into a rhythm of generating at least one blog post per week, if not more. The second **DELIVERABLE** is your first SEO-friendly blog post, uploaded to your own site and tagged with appropriate (keyword) tags. Use the “page tags worksheet” to step through an SEO-friendly blog post from keyword target to final content.





## 4.3

# PRESS RELEASES

After you've created your landing pages, anchor or evergreen content, and begun to blog, it's time to shift gears towards *Off Page* SEO. We'll cover Off Page theory in greater detail in the next Chapter, but for now, just realize that you want people to talk about your website across the Internet. Press releases function as a bridge between On Page and Off Page SEO: like blog posts, they live on your website and add fresh content, but like social media mentions and links, they become references external to your website that draw Google's attention to your website.

Here are the reasons why Google likes press releases. First, websites that have new, fresh content are clearly more "alive" than websites that never get updated. We live in a fast-paced world, and users want the *latest* iPhone software, the *latest* news about our President, and the *latest* nutritional supplement. Google wants to give users the latest and greatest on any topic, as well. Second, fresh content signals to Google that your website and business are still alive vs. the many "walking dead" websites that are businesses dead or dying in this age of economic turmoil. And third, press releases have a unique SEO advantage: **syndication**. Syndication services like NewsWire and EINPressWire connect with blogs, portals, other websites, and even Twitter feeds to push your press releases across the Web, creating inbound buzz and backlinks, which Google interprets as signs of community authority. Press release SEO, in short, gives a three-for-one benefit!

**Let's get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » What is a Press Release?
- » Make a Press Release Calendar

- » Upload Your SEO-Friendly Press Releases
- » Leverage Press Release Syndication Services
- »» Checklist: Press Release Action Items
- »» Deliverables: Press Release Worksheet

## » WHAT IS A PRESS RELEASE?

Have you ever heard the quip about the weather that everyone talks about it, but no one does anything? Or, if you don't like the news, go out and make some of your own? Well, there's some truth in these adages: you need to toot your own (marketing) horn to be successful, and press releases allow this in spades.

But what is a press release, and how does it differ from a blog post? Think of a blog post as a much shorter, more informal, off-the-cuff type of content vs. a more formal press release in which your company **FORMALLY ANNOUNCES** something **NEW AND EXCITING**. A common example would be when you launch a new product. If you're the Ford Motor Company, for instance, and you're announcing the new and improved 2022 Mustang, then it's time for a press release, usually written in the format of:

***Detroit, Michigan** – January 2, 2023. The Ford Motor Company, the leading producer of American-made sports vehicles, is proud to announce its new 2023 Mustang. With a venerable history as an American “muscle” car, the new 2023 all-electric Mustang will also be eco-friendly.*

etc. etc.

Basically, Ford has some **NEWS**, and it's **ANNOUNCING** that news to the world via a press release.

In fact, you can browse the official press releases of the Ford Motor Company at <https://media.ford.com/>. You can browse other sample press releases at

<http://jmlinks.com/13x> and <http://jmlinks.com/13y>. In fact, it's a good idea to take a keyword like "organic" and search for it on a service such as PRWeb.com to find press releases in your industry. To see a sample for "organic," visit <http://jmlinks.com/47q>. Replace "organic" with one of your keywords in the search bar and find out which competitors are already issuing press releases. Notice how company after company is "tooting its own horn" by announcing "news," and realize that you can, too.

## » MAKE A PRESS RELEASE CALENDAR

What can make a good press release? **Almost anything.** Keep your keyword worksheet in mind and look for press release opportunities around your company, products, or services that match up with your SEO keyword targets. I recommend you create a **press release calendar** of opportunities.

***Tip.** Many people are too "shy," acting as if they and their company don't have any "legitimate" news. Don't be shy! If you don't toot your own horn, no one will toot it for you. And remember that for SEO purposes, you're really aiming your promotion at Google, so if "real people" read your press releases, that's great, but your real objective is to use press releases to influence Google to rank your website higher. If they influence Google, you should be happy!*

For your first **TO-DO**, open up a Word document, title it "Press Release Calendar," and write down a list of possible press release topics and dates of the release. For example:

<b>SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE TOPIC:</b>	<b>WHEN TO RELEASE:</b>
New product or service	Every time you have a new product or service, generate a press release.
Annual Trade Show	Generate a press release before the annual trade show, as well as after

	announcing your participation to celebrate your success.
Personnel Changes	Generate a press release for every major corporate hire.
New website content	Generate a press release after any major blog post, list of “top seven resources,” infographic, etc., and even when you update a landing page or anchor content.
Partnership Announcements	Generate a press release after any cooperative partnership with a company or supplier.
Industry Awards or Milestones	Any time you win an industry award or cross a milestone (such as the 1000th follower on Twitter), it’s time for a press release!

Your **press release calendar** will help keep you focused and tie your press release opportunities to your keyword worksheet. The goal is to avoid writer’s block and get into a rhythm of at least two press releases per month. Have a company meeting and divvy up the responsibilities by assigning writing a press release to different people in the company for different events or for different months. Make your SEO a “team sport” rather than attempting to do it all yourself.

### Steps to Writing an SEO-friendly Press Release

Once you have an idea in hand, here are the steps to create a press release:

1. Identify the **press release idea**. Realize that a press release can be not only a new product or a new technology but something as simple as your participation in a trade show, an event that you may be having, a new hire, new inventory, or

even your commentary on an industry trend. **Literally, anything new can become a press release!**

2. Connect the press release idea to a **target keyword** from your keyword worksheet. The point of generating press releases, after all, is to improve keyword performance.
3. Include an *http://* format link to your website in your press release, preferably near the target keywords. For example, have a sentence that says something like, “*To learn more about our amazing car insurance, visit <http://www.ourcompany.com/car-insurance>.*”
4. Create your **press release** following “**SEO best practices**” for On Page SEO, as explained in Chapter 3.1. Be sure to include your keywords in the Headline / Title and in the actual content of the release itself.
5. **Upload** the press release to your website, be sure that your website has a press release section with each press release on an independent URL, and include a “one-click” link from the homepage to the press release.
6. Leverage free and/or paid **syndication services** such as PRLog.org and PRWeb.com to proliferate mentions of your press releases around the Internet.

To browse sample press releases that follow the correct procedures, visit <http://jmlinks.com/47p>.

## » UPLOAD YOUR SEO-FRIENDLY PRESS RELEASES

Double-check your press release to make sure that it follows “On Page” SEO best practices. Here’s your checklist:

ITEM	SEO PAGE TAG STRUCTURE
Pithy, exciting headline	<TITLE> tag
First paragraph with “main idea”	<META DESCRIPTION> tag and first paragraph.

Target URL	A target URL on your website, to which you want to attract Google. Embed this in the first paragraph, and have it as a “naked” URL (http://) format in the third paragraph.
Several paragraphs describing your news and an image.	Write keyword heavy copy and include at least one image with ALT attribute.
Contact information for more info.	Embedded URL early in the press release, set up in http:// format plus contact information at the end of the release

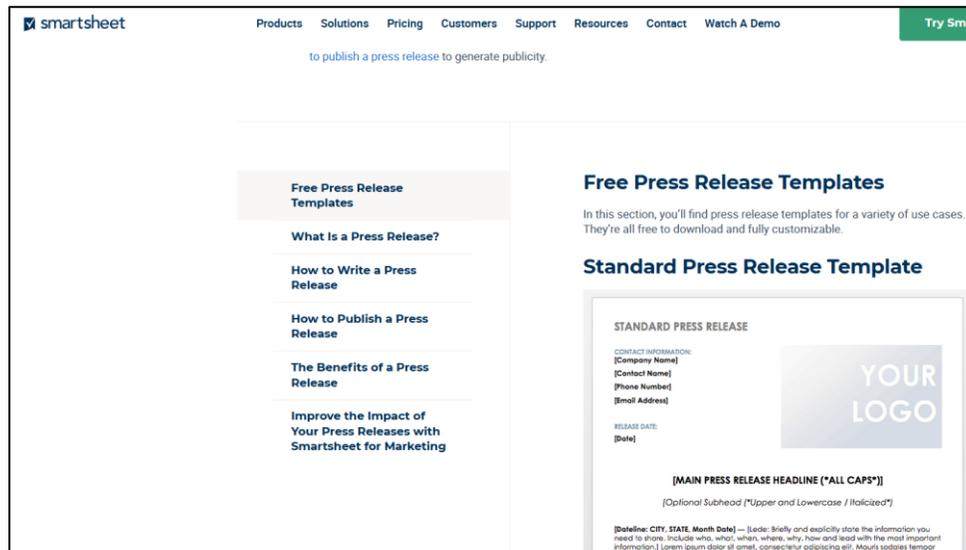
In other words, follow your HTML page tag template to optimize your press release in terms of its on-page SEO. Be sure to embed your target keywords in your <TITLE> tag and use best SEO practices like the H1 family, <B>, <STRONG>, ALT attributes, for images, etc. Write **keyword-heavy** text for the press release body! Make sure that it has a snappy <TITLE> and a snappy META DESCRIPTION / first paragraph so that people will be interested in “reading more.”

At the website structure level, your best practice is to have a directory called “news” as in *http://www.yourcompany.com/news/* and to host each press release in HTML linked to from a primary news gateway page. I also recommend that you run at least three press releases on your homepage, with “one-click” links down to each new press release. All of this freshens your website and pulls Google into your new content.

**VIDEO.** Watch a quick video tutorial on how to write an SEO-friendly press release at <http://jmlinks.com/18f>.

Good examples of press releases can be found <http://jmlinks.com/13z>.

Smartsheet offers free press release templates at <http://jmlinks.com/54r>. These are easy ways to go step-by-step to a press release. Here's a screenshot:



If you use a template, remember to insert your keywords into any release that you are using for SEO. Make sure that your target keywords are in the press release headline as well as in the body and include at least one link from the press release to your website in the *http/https* format.

## Press Releases After the Penguin Update

Before the Penguin update to Google, you could use Press Releases to “optimize” your inbound links. (Remember that the Penguin update is a Google algorithm penalty for suspicious inbound links). For example, you’d create a bunch of press releases, all linking back to your site around the phrase “industrial fans” or “motorcycle insurance.” This manipulation did not make Google happy, so the search giant pressured the major services to add the NOFOLLOW tag to their releases, which nullified much of this benefit as part of Google’s so-called Penguin algorithm update.

Thus, for a short while, press releases had little impact on SEO. However, there is always another turn of the screw. Now, despite the fact that press release URLs remain

“nofollow” in most circumstances, Google does tend to reward sites that issue them. *(Trust me: I know this based on client experiments; the reason probably being that in many industries, Google has so few links to choose from among competing sites that the sheer quantity of press release links can be sufficient to help a site get to the top).*

Google denies this (<http://jmlinks.com/47r>), and you’ll read on the blogosphere that press releases don’t work. You’ll also read that the moon landing was faked and that the earth is flat. The trick here is to be skeptical, experiment, and don’t go crazy, issuing five thousand press releases in one month.

## SET A GOAL OF ONLY TWO PRESS RELEASES PER MONTH

In addition, if you use ONLY the *http://* format for your clickable links, there are still a small percentage of sites that retain the DOFOLLOW link structure. So be sure to include links FROM the press release BACK to your site in the format of **<http://www.company.com>**. The reality is that Google is often forced to choose not between two GREAT sites to rank for a search query but between two just OK sites; if yours is the site with a few inbound links via Press Releases, including *nofollow* links, you can often win.

*The perfect is the enemy of the good (Voltaire).*

*You don’t have to run faster than the bear, just faster than your buddy (Unknown).*

*Google might publicly say one thing, but the reality might be something altogether different and this includes the value of nofollow links.*

To see examples of Press Releases issued by the JM Internet Group with examples of proper link formatting, visit <http://jmlinks.com/56t>. As is so often true in SEO, “A little salt is good for the soup, but too much salt ruins it.” In other words, I recommend that you create two – *but no more than two* – press releases per month for syndication,

that you use the <http://> format in your links, and that you write them in proper English with real or quasi-real news in them. Strive for them to be “good for humans” and “good for Google,” and they work.

## » LEVERAGE PRESS RELEASE SYNDICATION SERVICES

Once you’ve created your press release and uploaded it to your own website, you are ready to leverage press release syndication services. The best **free** service is PRLog.org (<http://www.prlog.org/>), and the best **paid** services are 24-7 Press Release (<https://www.24-7pressrelease.com/>) and EIN Presswire (<https://www.einpresswire.com/>). I often run releases on all three services in order to maximize the reach of my press releases.

If you have a budget, I highly recommend setting up a paid account on one of these services. With a yearly package, the cost per release can be substantially lower. A paid service gets you many times the benefit of the free services like PRLog.org.

After you’ve set up your account on one of these services, open your press release in one browser window. In another window, log into the press release syndication service and begin the process of submitting a release. Copy and paste the following from your press release into the syndication service -

**Headline.** Make sure it includes your target keywords!

**Quick Summary.** Write a pithy, exciting one-to-two sentence summary. This will usually become your META DESCRIPTION tag on the syndication service.

**News Body.** Copy and paste your news body. Be sure to embed a URL after the first or second paragraph, and write in the simple *http://* format (since embedded links may not be retained in syndicated press releases).

**URL / Active Link.** Make sure that your press release has at least one prominent link to your website, and **make sure it is in the <https://> format**. News is especially good at getting Google to index new web pages on your site!

**Contact Information.** Include a description of your company with a Web link and email address for more information. This is another link-building opportunity.

**Tags.** Select appropriate tags for keyword / content issues as well as target geographies.

**Keyword Links.** Both Newswire and EIN Presswire allow you to insert a few “optimized” or keyword links. Take your target keyword, highlight it, and include a link from that word to your website.

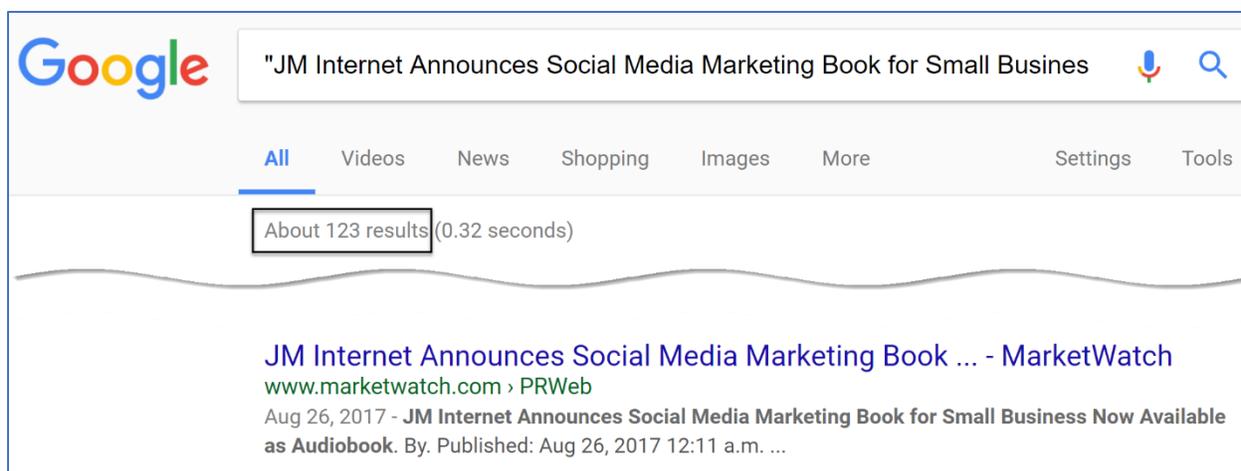
Finally, commit to publishing press releases on your website and using news syndication on a regular, consistent basis. It’s better to publish one release per month, consistently, than six releases in one month and nothing for six months.

**VIDEO.** Watch a quick video tutorial on how to syndicate press releases at <http://jmlinks.com/18f>.

**WORKSHEETS.** For the corresponding worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (passcode: *seo2023z*) to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “press release worksheet.”

## Measure Your Results

As you churn out press releases, measure your syndication by doing Google searches for the headline of your release in quotation marks. For example, our press release headlined, “JM Internet Announces Social Media Marketing Book for Small Business Now Available as Audiobook,” garnered approximately 123 results on Google (<http://jmlinks.com/38m>). Here’s a screenshot:



Each paid service will also generate reporting that shows the “pickups” of your press releases. In this way, you’re getting the benefit of syndication links back to your website, pickup on real sites on the Internet, and even social media pickups on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook. You can even go into Google Analytics and measure referrals from various websites that ran your press release; in that way, seeing which actual websites real people read and click over from.

## »» CHECKLIST: PRESS RELEASE ACTION ITEMS

Here are your press release **Action Items**:

- Identify** press release **opportunities** around your company, such as new products, participation in trade shows, new hires, or even pseudo-events such as new blog posts.
  - Create a **press release calendar** of two press releases per month.
  - Write** each press release *following SEO best practices* and post to your website.
- Syndicate** your press release via a service such as PRLog, EIN Presswire, or 24-7 Press Release, and include an *http/https* format link in the release.

❑ **Measure** your results, especially replication across the Internet, by searching for your press release by the headline in quotation marks

Check out the **free tools!** Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Press Releases* for my favorite free tools for press release issues. Just visit <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>.

## » **DELIVERABLES: A PRESS RELEASE CALENDAR AND A SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE**

The first **DELIVERABLE** for this Chapter is your press release calendar. This can be as simple as a Word document or Google document that serves as an “idea list” of when to generate a press release. The goal is to avoid writer’s block and get into a rhythm of generating at least two press releases per month. The second **DELIVERABLE** is an SEO-friendly press release, uploaded to your website and pushed out via a syndication service such as PRLOG.org or PRWEB.com. Use the “press release worksheet” to guide you to success.





# 5.1

## LINK BUILDING

**Steps #1 to #3** are “On Page” SEO: things you do to your own website. **Step #4** is about **content**: *content marketing*, *blogging*, and *press releases*. In **Step #5**, we fully cross the Rubicon, shifting our attention 100% to the actions of others through “Off Page” SEO. Just as *references* matter to an effective job search, external *links* matter a great deal to effective SEO.

**Step #5** in the **Seven Steps to SEO Success**, therefore, is to “go social.” Google pays incredible attention to how others talk about your website, whether in the format of inbound HTML *links* or inbound *social mentions*. We’ll turn first to **links**, the more traditional of the two, and in the next Chapter, look directly at **social authority** and **social mentions**. In Chapter 5.3, we’ll turn to **reviews**, which for local companies, are a key aspect of “Off Page” SEO.

Remember that a link *from* a directory, blog, web portal or another industry site *to* your website is counted as a **vote** by Google that your site is important. The *more* links (votes) you have, the *higher* you show on Google search results for your target keywords. But how do you get links? In this Chapter, we outline the basics of effective link-building for SEO.

**Let’s get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Understand Links and Off Page SEO
- » Beware the Penguin
- » Define Your Link Objectives
- » Solicit the Easy Links First
- » Identify Directory, Blog, and Other Link Targets

- » Reverse Engineer Competitors' Links
- » Create Link Bait
- »» Checklist: Link Building Action Items
- »» Deliverable: Link Building Worksheet

## » UNDERSTAND LINKS AND OFF PAGE SEO

Google's genius was to be the first search engine that effectively counted links as votes. Prior to Google, search engines basically looked at page content, and it was, therefore, very difficult to figure out which site was better if the page content itself contained the keywords. Google realized that you could look at how websites linked to other sites in a kind of grand vote scheme on the Internet.

For example, why do I rank so well for the searches *SEO expert Bay Area* or *Google Ads Expert Witness*? Among the reasons is that I have many sites linking to JasonMcDonald.org. BAIPA.org, for one, links to my website, JasonMcDonald.org at <http://jmlinks.com/6u>. In this way, BAIPA.org is “voting” that my website is important. Similarly, the Authors Guild (*Authorsguild.net*) (<http://jmlinks.com/18w>) also links to me. These “votes” reinforce my On Page SEO and propel me to the top of relevant searches on Google. The same is true for Progressive.com and Geico.com for searches in the insurance industry; these sites have many *other* sites linking back to them, thus “voting” to Google that these are the “most important” sites for a query like “motorcycle insurance.”

### Links are Like Votes

In short, a site with *more links to its website from other sites* than its competitors have is seen by Google as more important and ranks higher on Google, all other things being equal.

## LINKS ARE LIKE VOTES

Think of *links* like *votes in an election*, and you'll begin to understand how it works.

**Quantity.** How do you win the US Presidential Election? Get more votes. Generally speaking, the candidate who wins the popular vote becomes president. (*OK, not always – but, at least, that's what we tell our kids!*) If two websites are competing, the website with more links must be more important and therefore wins. (**Link quantity**)

**Quality.** Not all votes are alike, however. The voter must correctly vote for a candidate by marking his or her name correctly on the ballot. (*Think hanging chads in Florida and confusion about voter intent in 2000*). If two websites are competing, the website with more links that contain the keyword target will win (**Link syntax**).

**Authority.** Not all votes are equal. In the 2020 Presidential election, the votes of people in Arizona counted a lot more than the votes of people in California. Indeed, if you look back to the 2000 election, the votes of the justices on the Supreme Court counted the most, throwing that election to George Bush, even though Al Gore had won the popular vote. (**Link authority** or **PageRank**).

In general, therefore, links are like votes, and you want to secure as many external websites as possible linking to your website. But that's not the whole story; it's more complicated than simple quantity (*just like votes in a US Presidential election*), so you need a more detailed understanding of how Google counts links.

Let's dive into the three variables at play in the game of link-getting or "link-building," as it is called in the industry.

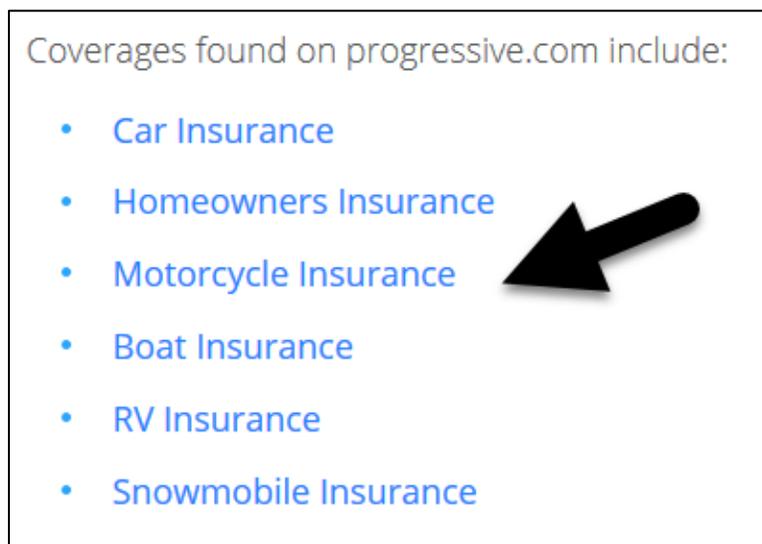
## #1 Link Quantity

All things being equal, the website that has *more* websites linking to it will rank higher on Google. If, for example, Website A in the "industrial fan" industry has 1,000 sites that link to it, and Website b has only 500 sites that link to it, Website A will rank higher on Google.

## #2 Optimized Link Syntax

An *optimized link* contains the target SEO keyword. If, for example, Website A has many (or more) links that have the blue linkable text around the phrase “industrial fans” vs. Website B that has more links that say only **http://www.myfans.com/** or “click here,” then – all things being equal, Website A will outrank Website B for the query “industrial fans” on Google.

If you’re confused as to what an optimized link is, here’s an example of a link “to” Progressive.com from Progressivecommercial.com at **http://jmlinks.com/47s**. Here’s a screenshot:



And here’s the HTML code:

```
<div class="grid-10 clearfix">
  <ul class="bulletList two-columns">
    <li><a href="https://www.progressive.com/auto/" target="_blank">Car Insurance</a></li>
    <li><a href="https://www.progressive.com/homeowners/" target="_blank">Homeowners Insurance</a></li>
    <li><a href="https://www.progressive.com/motorcycle/" target="_blank">Motorcycle Insurance</a></li>
    <li><a href="https://www.progressive.com/boat/" target="_blank">Boat Insurance</a></li>
    <li><a href="https://www.progressive.com/rv/" target="_blank">RV Insurance</a></li>
    <li><a href="https://www.progressive.com/snowmobile/" target="_blank">Snowmobile Insurance</a></li>
    <li><a href="https://www.progressive.com/segway/" target="_blank">Segway Insurance</a></li>
    <li><a href="http://investors.progressive.com/" target="_blank">Investors</a></li>
    <li><a href="https://www.progressive.com/careers/" target="_blank">Careers</a></li>
    <li><a href="https://progressive.mediaroom.com" target="_blank" data-gatrackdirect>Newsroom</a></li>
    <li><a href="https://www.progressive.com/lifelanes/subject/commercials/" target="_blank">TV Commercials</a></li>
  </ul>
</div>
```

This means that the link itself is telling Google to rank *progressive.com/motorcycle* for “Motorcycle Insurance.” Anytime you are on a website, hover your mouse over a link, and if that link is a keyword, then that is an “optimized link” that is signaling to Google the keyword context for the referenced website. That’s link **syntax**.

### #3 Domain Authority or PageRank

If quantity matters, and quality or syntax matters, there’s a third element: **authority**. It stands to reason, for example, that a link from the New York Times (NYTimes.com) is worth more than a link from the Tulsa World (Tulsaworld.com). More “powerful” websites have more “link juice” or “link authority” to pass to less powerful websites (such as yours). Having a link from the New York Times is worth more than a link from the Tulsa World, and having a link from the Tulsa World is worth more than a link from Jason’s Cat blog, and so on and so forth, down the ladder. Links from more authoritative sites count for more than links from less powerful websites.

## THE LINKS OF THE POWERFUL COUNT MORE THAN THE LINKS OF THE POWERLESS

Is this fair? No. Is life fair? No. Is it how it is? Yes. Accordingly, the Google algorithm quantifies this difference in authority as “PageRank” or what, in the industry, has come to be known as “Domain Authority.” It’s as if every website has a “credit score” and Google keeps that score.

While Google doesn't share its metrics, third-party tools like AHREFS, MOZ, or SEMRUSH allow you to peek behind the curtain and see the relative Domain Authority of different websites.

For example, according to AHREFS, NYTimes.com has a Domain Authority of 94, while TulsaWorld.com has a domain authority of 81. My website, JasonMcDonald.org, has a DA of 26. In other words, not all links are created or valued equally: a link from the NYTimes.com is worth an incredible amount, a link from TulsaWorld.com is also great, and a link from my website to yours is good but not in the same league, not at all.

Google calculates this **Domain Authority** (or "PageRank" as it is referred to historically) based on the number of links not just to any domain but to specific web pages or URLs on that domain. It's self-referential: the more websites that link to a URL, the more important that URL is, and the more "authority," "PageRank," or "Link Juice" that URL has to pass to other URLs on the Internet.

It's sort of like the popular kids in High School. How do you know they're popular? Because the other popular kids like them, and those popular kids have the "authority" to pass their popularity to new kids who come to the school. Dogs chase their tails, popular kids beget more popular kids, and the most important websites on the Internet lend credibility to the other "very important" websites.

If, in other words, Website A has more links from more *authoritative* websites than Website B, then – all things being equal – it will outrank Website B.

## Relevance Matters

*Authoritative* isn't just raw domain authority, however – it's *relevance*, too. For a Brahman cattle breeder, a link from Brahman.org (DA of 51) may be worth more than a link from NYTimes.com because of the keyword *relevance* of the linking website. Keywords, in other words, re-enter the picture. Because Brahman.org talks about Brahman cattle (and not organic potatoes), it's a highly relevant AND authoritative website for websites that want to rank for terms like "Brahman bulls." By contrast, if you want to rank for "organic potatoes," a link from the Potato Association of America (Potatoassociation.org), especially their page on "organic potatoes) at <http://jmlinks.com/54t/> is an extremely relevant AND authoritative link for you to get.

The same is true for **local links**; if you want to rank for “DUI attorney Milwaukee,” then having links from *Wisconsin* or *Milwaukee* websites is better than having links from *national* or *international* attorney websites. Having the *local* nonprofit link to you, even if its Domain Authority is small, may be more impactful than having a non-relevant national website! Local links impact local SEO, just as industry-specific links impact industry-specific SEO, and so on and so forth.

In sum, the cool kids in school that are *jocks* are relevant if you want to be a cool *athlete*, and the cool kids in school that are *theater* people are relevant if you want to be an *actress*. It’s the same thing on the Web with respect to links. *Authority* and *keyword-relevance* work together.

## Summing Up

Before your head explodes with all this complexity, let’s keep it simple. You want other websites to link to you -

1. in high **quantity** (more is better);
2. with the **right syntax** (try to get your keywords in the link text itself or at least nearby in what is called “keyword proximity,” rather than just an http:// link or a “click here” link); and
3. from **high Domain Authority** websites (NYTimes.com is worth more than TulsaWorld.com)
4. from **relevant websites**, that is, sites that are **relevant to your industry** (a link from Brahman.org is worth more to a Brahman cattle ranch website than a link from Pizzaexpo.com).

**Links** are like **votes**, and you want **quantity**, **quality**, and **authority**. As you solicit links from other websites, however, be aware that you won’t always get a *trifecta* or perfect *quantity*, *quality*, and *authority* from a link, so get what you can. As Voltaire said, “The perfect is the enemy of the good.”

# SOLICIT LINKS (AND DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF)

## It Gets Complicated

The preceding explanation is only a simple model of how links work in the Google algorithm. The reality is more complicated. For instance, what if Website A has a higher quantity of links to it, but Website B has better syntax vis-à-vis the target keyword? Or, what if Website A has better syntax, but Website B has a few links from very high-authority websites? Or what if Website A has many, high-quality links but Website B has a few high-quality links and better “On Page” SEO? The Google algorithm takes all these factors into account, so remember, it’s not just *one* factor that propels you to the top of Google but the algorithmic *summation* of these weighted factors vs. your competitors.

Because “it’s complicated,” just remember – in general – to always be on the lookout for links to your website as you also remember that success at SEO is “everything working together” factor-by-factor.

## A Word about NoFollow

Here’s another wrinkle about links and link-building. At a technical level, the **rel="nofollow"** attribute tells Google to ignore a link; these types of links are devalued by Google. So if you see *nofollow* in the HTML source code, it’s a sign that the given link is not as valuable. Here’s a screenshot of the Pokémon page on Wikipedia, for example, with an outbound link to the official Pokémon website:

## External links

- Official Japanese website of *Pokémon* [↗](#) (Japanese)
- Official US website of *Pokémon* [↗](#)
- Official UK website of *Pokémon* [↗](#)

And here's the HTML source code showing the link, including the *nofollow* attribute, therefore nullifying the link:

```
<a rel="nofollow" class="external text" href="http://www.pokemon.com/">Official US website of <i>Pokémon</i></a>
```

You can see it at <http://jmlinks.com/6w>. What this means is that the link FROM Wikipedia TO pokemon.com does NOT help its SEO because the *nofollow* attribute tells Google NOT to count the link as a vote. Commonly, as you look for links to get to your website, be sure to look at the source code, and if you see the *nofollow* attribute, then these links are not valuable. The most common “nofollow” links are links from blog comments, links from social media sites, and links from some associations or directories.

**Note:** a link that does NOT contain the *nofollow* attribute is commonly referred to as a *dofollow* link, although there isn't technically a *dofollow* attribute.

Don't freak out, however, and don't overthink it. You don't have to be an HTML source code genius to understand links! Just realize that generally speaking, links in comments on blogs and forum websites are all *nofollow*. Craig's list, Wikipedia, and many directory links are also *nofollow*. Many links on social media are also *nofollow*. Press release links are commonly *nofollow* too. These links are not as valuable as links that do not have the *nofollow* attribute (called *dofollow* links in SEO lingo).

*However... in SEO there's always another twist of the screw...* In fact, as of September, 2019, Google further overcomplicated the link system by introducing new “link hints” to replace the “nofollow” attribute. See <http://jmlinks.com/51v>. By 2022, we can conclude – fortunately or unfortunately – that Google’s effort has flopped. For all intents and purposes, links from websites to other websites are either “follow” or “nofollow,” and that’s it.

The point is that we know that links matter, and we know that, in certain circumstances, Google can ignore all (or at least some) of the “link juice” or “link vote” flowing from a link to a given website. But anyone who claims that they definitively know how this all works either works very high up at Google or is just bluffing.

### **Do Nofollow Links Matter?**

Let’s return to the basics of *nofollow*. The first takeaway is that *nofollow* links do *not* help SEO. This is the official Google position and commonly held position in the SEO community. However (*there's always a however in SEO*), my opinion is that *nofollow* links actually *do* count, and can help your SEO. Think of links like a stock portfolio: you want diversity in your links – some *nofollow*, some *dofollow*, some in the HTTP format, some in your brand name, and some in your keyword syntax. *Nofollow* links are like “penny stocks” – one by one, not very valuable, but in totality, they can indeed be valuable.

Google, in short, probably devalues the weight of *nofollow* links to the tune of 90% or 95%, but they still seem to carry some weight. No one knows for certain but because Google has terrified so many sites into making blank *nofollows* across all outbound links, Google has created a problem for itself. For many smaller sites (competing for many narrow keywords), there aren’t many links that differentiate site #1 from site #2. This is often the case for many small businesses. You might have ten links, and your competitor might have seven. And if all (or most) of these links are nofollows, then Google still has to decide. Presto! *Nofollow* links suddenly count. For a fascinating study of the power of *nofollow* links, visit <http://jmlinks.com/47t>.

## Just Get Links

Again, before you give up in despair at all this technical mumbo-jumbo: just remember to **get links**. Ask customers, suppliers, and other business contacts whom you know to add a link FROM their website TO your website. It can be as simple as asking the janitorial company that cleans your office, or the pizza company that delivers your office pizza, to go on their website and add a link FROM their site TO your site. Or, to ask a customer who has a blog to write a product review about her experience and have her include a link in that blog post FROM her blog TO your website. Or, ask Mom, Dad, Uncle Jay, your best friend... anyone who has a blog to write up an article about you, and link TO your website.

Register for professional associations that include links to your website. Set up your social profiles on Twitter, Facebook, Google My Business, and other sites. Ask everyone you know who has a website to write something about your company and link over to it.

### Just get links!

Just like in real-world elections, the most important part of successful link-building is sheer **quantity**. Politicians don't always sweat the small stuff; they kiss a lot of babies and shake a lot of hands in their quest for high-quality votes. So should you in your quest for links!

## POLITICIANS KISS BABIES & SEOS SOLICIT LINKS

For further step-by-step directions on how to solicit links, I highly recommend the MOZ guide at <http://jmlinks.com/14n> and the BackLinko SEO link-building tactic list at <http://jmlinks.com/38r>.

## » BEWARE THE PENGUIN

Google’s “Penguin” update is an ongoing algorithm attack against artificial link-building. While officially, Google says that you should NEVER “build links” but rather just wait “passively” for links to come to your site, a passive strategy will get you nowhere.

### **You can, must, and should “build links.”**

However, you have to be aware of Penguin and solicit links in a smart fashion. First, let’s consider what Penguin penalizes, and then let’s turn to the “big picture” of link-building post-Penguin.

First, Penguin penalizes a large number of in-bound links from “low quality” websites as well as “overoptimized links.” “Low quality” websites are generally artificial blogs – blogs that are poorly written, contain non-related content, and are clearly created “for search engines” and not for people. A good example of this scenario is Indian-based SEO companies that built thousands upon thousands of blogs (called a private blog network), and then (for money) will link back to your site around a target keyword phrase such as *Miami divorce attorney* or *organic baby food*. It is easy for Google to detect this chicanery and penalize sites with this sort of link footprint.

In fact, if you are solicited by SEO companies offering link schemes that directly involve posting links to your website on low-quality blogs or low-quality directories, do **NOT** fall for these schemes! They will hurt you much more than help you.

### **What are Overoptimized Links?**

“Overoptimized” links are links from other websites to your website that all include the same keyword phrase over and over. A “divorce attorney,” for example, might create / pay for / solicit links from blogs all around the exact phrase “divorce attorney.” He would end up with, for example, 1000 blogs all linking back to his website, all having the format of:

blah, blah, blah, blah, blah [divorce attorney](http://www.divorceattorneywebsite.com) (linking to: <http://www.divorceattorneywebsite.com>) blah blah blah blah blah

Now, to have 1000 links all exactly alike, all linking back to the same website, is “unnatural,” isn’t it? So what Penguin did was look at the “link footprint” of websites and identify “unnatural” link footprints. It then penalizes these sites by taking them off of Google or harshly pushing them from Page 1 to Page 101.

Penguin looks for “unnatural” link profiles: many links from low-quality blogs or directories as well as many optimized links.

## Link Diversity

Second, when building links post-Penguin, you should a) never solicit links from low-quality blogs and/or easy, free directories, and certainly not get links from sites that blatantly advertise “links for sale,” and b) pay attention to the (over)optimization of your link structure. A good general rule of thumb is 1/3 *http://* links, 1/3 *branded* links (links to your company name), and 1/3 *optimized* links. In HTML code, these are written as:

Check out Jason McDonald’s SEO consulting website at <https://www.jasonmcdonald.org/> (naked or http link).

Check out [<a href= "http://www.jasonmcdonald.org/ ">](http://www.jasonmcdonald.org/)Jason McDonald’s</a> SEO consulting website. (branded link)

Check out Jason McDonald, an amazing [<a href= "http://www.jasonmcdonald.org/ ">](http://www.jasonmcdonald.org/)SEO consultant</a> in San Francisco. (optimized link)

**Link diversity** means having people link to you in different formats and getting links from a variety of sources: trade associations, blogs, directories, non-profits, etc.

Fortunately, for most companies, too many links and *too many* over-optimized links are the least of their problems; most companies just have *too few* links. But, that said, if you engage in serious link-building, you must “beware the Penguin” and build a “natural” yet robust inbound link profile. Build links at your own risk!

## **Outbound Links from Your Website**

Finally, Penguin penalizes websites that are “too perfect.” Pre-Penguin, many SEO experts would advise you never to link out FROM your website TO other websites. This advice is no longer correct; a website that has zero outbound links looks suspicious to Google. Similarly, many websites would use the *nofollow* attribute on all outbound links, or to “sculpt” links internally. After Penguin, this kind of behavior is a dead giveaway that you are attempting to manipulate Google. So, don’t be “too perfect:”

Do not refuse to link outbound to other websites because a website with zero outbound links looks suspicious to Google.

Do not “nofollow” all your links to other websites, as the use of “nofollow” on all outbound links can also look suspicious to Google.

Do not “nofollow” certain internal links in an attempt to link sculpt, as this also looks suspicious to Google.

Therefore, post-Penguin, I advise you to strategically link out to highly reputable websites in your industry. A breeder of Brahman cattle, for example, should link out to sites like the National Brahman Association ([brahman.org](http://brahman.org)) as well as other websites in the cattle industry. A San Francisco attorney might link to the city of San Francisco ([SFgov.org](http://SFgov.org)). The objective is to convince Google that you are a good “Net citizen,” and that you are linking *out* as well as receiving links *in*. Just keep your outbound links to a minimum, and make sure that they are to highly reputable sites in your own industry.

You may also hear a warning that “reciprocal links” will cancel each other out – if the Brahman cattle breeder is listed on Brahman.org, and he also links over to Brahman.org, this will “cancel out” the “link juice,” for instance. While this might theoretically have some truth in it, in practical terms, I do not find this to be so. Yes, it is better if people only link to you (and you do not reciprocate), but I just wouldn’t stress this too much. In all of this, I am assuming you have a) relevant links and b) you aren’t massively engaging in reciprocal link schemes. So much of proper link building is proper scale. Did I ever mention to you that “A little salt is good for the soup, but too much salt ruins the soup?” Don’t overdo any type of link-building.

## Google’s Hypocrisy

As we conclude this explanation of what links are, why they matter, and the basic ideas on how to build links *post-Penguin*, let me stop for a moment and talk about Google’s hypocrisy. Google famously had the phrase “Don’t be evil” as their corporate motto, which, besides being pretentious, has turned out to be yet another empty platitude by yet another big corporation. Google, like all big corporations, keeps its eyes on profits and has a very effective corporate marketing machine working hard to create a brand image of efficiency and honesty. Google isn’t any better, or any worse, than any other big corporation.

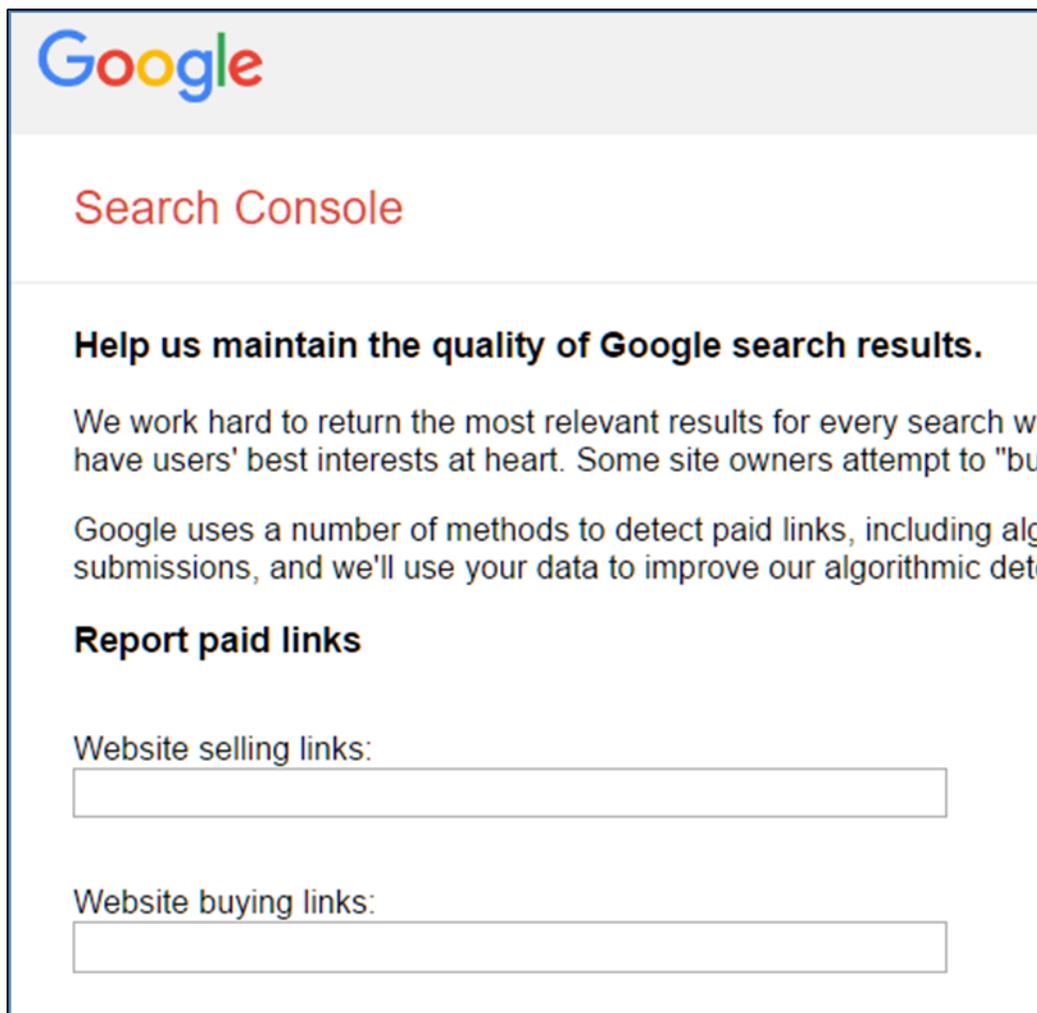
In terms of links, the official propaganda of Google is that no one should ever build links. (Read it at <http://jmlinks.com/14r>). In Google’s opinion, we should all just passively wait until links “spontaneously” emerge on the Web, and then Google will “objectively” evaluate the link footprint of competing websites and choose the “best” website to place at the top of its results.

I’m sorry to destroy your illusions, but if you’ve read this far in this book, you should realize, by now, that the idea that Google results are “objective” is pretty ridiculous. It’s a competitive war between companies to get to the top, and in any serious keyword competition, everyone is working very hard to “manipulate” Google. Your competitors (at least the smart ones) are building links, and you pretty much have to, too, even though Google’s official public line is that you should NEVER solicit links.

Everyone, quite simply, has to violate the rules without any clear guidance as to what the “real” rules are. Google simply looks the other way and occasionally smacks down

a vendor or two when it gets out of hand. You can either be 100% compliant with Google's policy on links (*and end up spending a fortune on Google Ads*), or you can violate Google's policy and succeed.

It gets worse. Google even encourages companies to “turn in” competitors that are violating its policies. Watch an official video on this at <http://jmlinks.com/14t>. You can even “turn in” a competitor via the official Google webspam form at <http://jmlinks.com/14u>. Here's a screenshot:



The screenshot shows the Google Search Console interface. At the top is the Google logo. Below it, the text 'Search Console' is displayed in red. A heading reads 'Help us maintain the quality of Google search results.' followed by a paragraph: 'We work hard to return the most relevant results for every search we have users' best interests at heart. Some site owners attempt to "buy...'. Below this is another paragraph: 'Google uses a number of methods to detect paid links, including algorithmic submissions, and we'll use your data to improve our algorithmic detection...'. The section is titled 'Report paid links' and contains two input fields: 'Website selling links:' and 'Website buying links:'. Both fields are currently empty.

Nefariously, the effect of all these activities is to encourage users to turn in other users as well as to create “negative SEO” when one competitor “fakes” noncompliance by

another competitor (and turns them in) to destroy their website performance. It's a mess and far, far from "don't be evil" in terms of its impact. Yet Google, happily making millions, doesn't seem very concerned about the devastating impact its policies have on websites or on the "unintended consequences" of its policies.

Now, I'm not saying go 100% to the dark side via black hat SEO and build or buy fake links. And I'm not saying I have a solution for how this could be done differently. I'm not Google, and I don't have a zillion-dollar budget to figure out a solution. *It's Google's world; we just live in it.* But what I am saying is put your best foot forward, solicit real links from real websites, and you'll go a long way towards succeeding. But don't publicly announce what you're doing, and don't wave a red flag under Google's nose.

### **Solicit Links at Your Own Risk!**

Most importantly, I am not a lawyer. Solicit links at your own risk. Do SEO at your own risk. But let's be adults here. People speed on the freeway. People cheat on their taxes. People litter. People cut in line, and so on and so forth. So it is with links and link-building: for all intents and purposes, any website worth its SEO salt is in violation of Google's terms of service!

And, even more ominously, there are many, many examples of websites that are heavily violating Google's policies on links and doing very, very well. Enforcement of any rules is sporadic at best, and Google takes periodic action against high-profile violators to "frighten" the SEO community into compliance. See, for example, the "Rap Genius" incident in which Google made an "example" of Rap Genius as a site that had gone "too far" in soliciting links at <http://jmlinks.com/14s>. There are many, many sites that are violating Google's policies just as badly, but Rap Genius was singled out and made an example.

### **Be Skeptical. Experiment and Do What Works**

The bottom line is that you should be skeptical about what Google says are the rules and what the rules actually are. You should be skeptical about what you read in the blogosphere about these policies. And you should be silent when and if, your website is doing well in terms of SEO for fear that a competitor will turn you into Google. You

should not get greedy and “go too far.” The art of SEO is figuring out what actually works despite what Google says, despite what you read, and staying pretty silent about it. Just as you might drive on Highway 101 in California – speed, but don’t be the fastest car on the freeway. As for the posted speed limit, it’s not the “real” limit, but who knows what the “real” limit is? You certainly can’t ask the Highway Patrol!

So, now that we’ve taken a little side journey into Google’s misleading and contradictory policies on links, let’s return to some relatively safe tactics to build links to your website (at your own risk, of course).

## » DEFINE YOUR LINK OBJECTIVES

Now that you know the game – that *links are like votes*, it’s time to define your objectives. We’ll assume you’ve SEO-optimized your homepage, landing pages, keyword footer, and that you’ve begun to blog and issue press releases. Those tasks are done or underway. In terms of links, therefore:

- Links are like votes, i.e., quantity.
  - **Objective:** *get people to link to you.*
- Link syntax matters, i.e., quality. It matters whether links are around your keyword phrases and/or come from content that talks about your keyword themes.
  - **Objective:** *get links that contain your keyword phrases.*
- Link PageRank or Web Authority matters, i.e., authority. Some sites (e.g., NYTimes.com) or more authoritative than others (e.g., TulsaWorld.com).
  - **Objective:** get authoritative sites to link to you.
- Link Context matters, i.e., keywords and themes. If you want to rank for “Brahman cattle breeder” find sites that talk about cows and cattle. If you want to rank for “weight loss exercises” find sites that talk about weight loss and/or exercise.
  - **Objective:** get thematically relevant sites to link to you.
- Link Footprint matters, meaning you want a “natural” footprint of about 1/3 naked http links, 1/3 branded links, and 1/3 optimized links from quality websites.

- **Objective:** increase inbound links to your website but do so in a “natural” way in terms of the footprint.

Link building is a process. It’s the proverbial marathon not a sprint. Know your objectives as you “hunt” or “fish” for links.

## Don’t Get Discouraged

Now that you know the link game don’t get discouraged. People commonly think, “Dratz, no one will link to us... we are so boring... or our industry is so dumb that no one will link to anyone.” However, you don’t have to run faster than the bear, just faster than your buddy! You’re not running for President of the United States; it’s more likely that you’re running for school board in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, an election decided by tens or hundreds of votes. Your competitor faces the same challenges as you, so if you just pro-actively solicit links – even just a few links – you’ll usually win.

*He might have two links to his website, and you’ll have three. You win.*

*He might have ten links to his website, and you’ll have twelve. You win.*

Let’s turn now to **link-building**: systematic strategies for getting other websites to link to your website for SEO. (For an in-depth list of ideas to help you brainstorm your link-building tactics, check out the BackLinko guide at <http://jmlinks.com/14p>. Another good one is Quick Sprout’s *Advanced Guide to Link-building* by Neil Patel at <http://jmlinks.com/38n>.)

## » SOLICIT THE EASY LINKS FIRST

Your **ecosystem partners**, i.e., those companies you do business with on a regular basis, are your easiest link targets. If you attend an industry trade show as an exhibitor, for example, ask for a link back to your company website from the trade show website. If you buy a lot of stuff from a supplier, require a link back to your company website

from their website as a condition of doing business. If you sponsor a local charity like the *Breast Cancer Walk Pittsburgh*, ask for a link back to your company website from the charity website. If your boss teaches a class at the local university, help him set up a link from his profile page back to your company website. If anyone in your company gets interviewed or is able to write a guest blog post on another website, make sure that they get a link back in their author profile! If Grandma or Grandpa (or the friends, family, or contacts of key employees), has a website or blog, ask them to link to you.

You get the idea: create a **culture of link solicitation** in your organization so that on a day-in and day-out level, everyone in your company is soliciting links and (over time) getting them.

Don't forget your **social media profile** links! If local search is important to you, make sure that your company is included in Google My Business, Yelp, Citysearch, and other local listing sites. Be sure to set up Twitter, Google My Business, Facebook, and other social media profiles for your companies and include links in those profiles.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on easy link-building tactics at <http://jmlinks.com/17w>.

Your first **TO-DO** is to open up the “link building worksheet” and fill out the easy link target section. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “link building worksheet.”

## » IDENTIFY DIRECTORY, BLOG, AND OTHER LINK TARGETS

Quality directories, blogs, and other websites found on Google make great link targets. How do you find them? For **directories**, do a Google search for keywords such as “AddURL + Your Keywords,” “Directory + Your Keywords,” and/or “Catalog + Your Keywords.” As you browse these sites, make a note of their **Domain Authority** (*use MOZ.com or AHREFS.com, and the Domain Authority metric*) and **keyword themes** that align with your own target keywords.

A marriage counselor in Bethesda, Maryland, for example, might search Google for:

*marriage counselor directory*

*directory of therapists*

*relationship therapist directory*

*directory Maryland businesses*

*directory woman-owned businesses*

*“Add URL” marriage*

Her goals are to a) identify quality directories that have *dofollow* outbound links, b) figure out how much it costs and/or what the procedures are to be listed, and c) acquire those directory links. **Remember:** if it’s absolutely easy to get in, every SEO will do it, and the directory will be low quality or contaminated. **You want serious directories that either cost money and/or have real qualifications to be included. Do not list yourself in free directories.** Quality is important!

## Identify Relevant Blogs

To find **blogs**, type your target keywords plus the word “blog” into the Google search box. For example, our marriage therapist might type in “marriage therapy blog” at <http://jmlinks.com/19h>. You’re looking for blogs that will allow a guest post and/or blogs that are interested in your keywords. Remember to also pro-actively ask customers if they have a blog, and if they do, solicit them to write something about your company, product, or service. Then you have to devise an idea / solicitation that they’d like to include on their blog, plus include a link back to your website.

A common tactic is to give out product samples, for free, in exchange for a product review and link back on the blog. (Again, with an eye to Google’s sensitivity about links, don’t “overdo” this – find high quality, legitimate bloggers, and don’t publicly announce

your product-review-link program!). Do NOT go to a public blog exchange and buy links – that’s way too obvious and too dangerous!

## Complementary Competitors

Finally, do searches for your major keyword phrases. As you search, segregate your **direct competitors** (sites so similar to your own that there is no way that they would link to you) from your **complementary competitors**. These are sites like blogs, personal websites, portals, directories, Wiki entries, and the like that “show up” on your searches but may have a complementary reason to link to you. A wedding photographer, for example, might search for not only directories of wedding suppliers but also florists, priests, rabbis, caterers, bakers, and facilities that would likely exchange links due to the complementary nature of their businesses.

## Sponsor Non-Profits and Include Links

Another great tactic is non-profit link-building. Solicit non-profit links: identify relevant non-profits, and pay them as a “sponsor” with a link from their website to your own. As with all link-building tactics, do not overdo this.

A good way to do this is to search Google using the site: command, as in:

*site:\*.org “your keywords”*

For example: *site:\*.org “organic food”*

For example: *site:\*.org “organic food” “link to your website”*

Another way to do this is to use online directories of nonprofits such as GuideStar (<https://www.guidestar.org/>) or the innovative free tool by ZipSprout called the “Local Sponsorship Finder” at <https://lsf.zipsprout.com/>.

The tactic is thus to identify non-profits in your keyword or local community, drill down to those that allow paying sponsors to link back to their website, and figure out how

much it costs to get a link on their website. Voila: a link-building strategy based on helping non-profits!

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on how to identify nonprofits for link-building at <http://jmlinks.com/18e>.

## **To-dos for Link-Building**

Your second **TO-DO** is to fill out the section of the “link building worksheet” focusing on blogs, portals, and directories. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “link building worksheet.”

## **» REVERSE ENGINEER COMPETITORS’ LINKS**

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be able to “reverse engineer” who links to your competitors and then solicit links from those websites? You can easily do this.

Many fabulous tools exist to “reverse engineer” inbound links of competitors. Most offer a limited “free” version, and for about \$99 / month, you can access a robust paid version. I recommend signing up for at least one month, spending the \$99, and doing some in-depth link research. You can download all the data into Excel spreadsheets and then cancel your account.

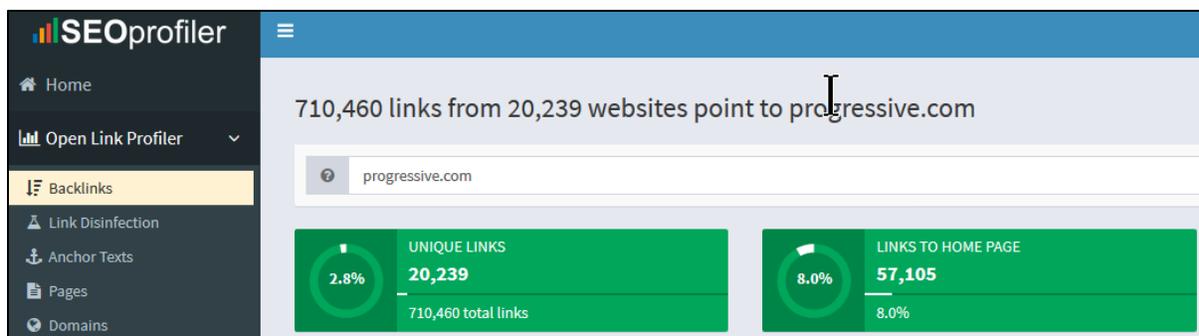
Your objective is to identify complementary websites that link to a competitor but who may also be willing to link to you. Type each competitor’s homepage URL into these tools, and then surf to the appropriate websites, making a note of the PageRank (domain authority), content, and contact information for your “Link Building” target list. Here are my three favorites:

**Link Explorer by Moz** (<https://moz.com/>). Type your competitor’s homepage into this tool or the URL of a highly-ranked site on Google. Browse to see who is linking to your competitors.

**Ahrefs** (<http://ahrefs.com/>). Similar to Open Site Explorer, this tool allows you to input a competitor URL and reverse engineer who is linking to that competitor.

**Open Link Profiler** (<http://www.openlinkprofiler.org/>). This tool tracks new links to your website (or to competitors) and requires no registration and no payment. It's totally free!

Here's a screenshot of Open Link Profiler's analysis of <http://www.progressive.com/> showing that that site has over 20,239 linking domains totaling over 710,460 inbound links. No wonder *progressive.com* dominates searches for insurance!



**VIDEO.** Watch a video on how to use the AHREFS tool and other link discovery tools to “reverse engineer” competitors at <http://jmlinks.com/18d>.

At the end of this process, you should have a defined list of “link targets” sorted by PageRank (Domain Authority) and their keyword themes with your “keyword community.” Your third **TO-DO** is to take this list and then go one by one through the results, soliciting links from the various targets. If summer is here, link solicitation is a great task for a cheap intern! Or, go to a site like Fiverr.com (<http://www.fiverr.com/>) and identify a cheap outsourced worker to do the “grunt” work of your link solicitation system.

## » CREATE LINK BAIT

**Link bait** takes link building to the next level. Link bait is the art of creating content that is so compelling that people will *spontaneously* link to it without you even having to ask. Let's run through some common link-bait ideas.

### **Content Bait**

People love in-depth content, so write an in-depth “Frequently Asked Questions” document or article that fits the needs and interests of your industry. If you're a probate lawyer, for example, write a beefy article for your blog on “How to avoid probate.” Beefy, in-depth, good content becomes link bait for journalists, bloggers, and influencers on social media looking to point their audience to the “ultimate guide” on a key topic. Here's a great example. BackLinko has written the “definitive guide” to Link Building (which is, in and of itself, link bait) at <http://jmlinks.com/7b>.

### **Ego Bait**

Have a customer of the month contest (if your customers have websites), and have a supplier of the month award (if your suppliers have websites). Email, call, and even give gifts to blogs, portals, and other content sites that might be willing to cover you and your company. In link building, remember you are dealing with other people, so look at the situation from their perspective: what's in it for them? If you “feature” them with an award, they'll often spontaneously link to you – plus, your “award contest” can get press, publicity, and links.

### **Product Sample Bait**

Give away free samples of your product only to people who have a blog and/or are willing to share your site on social media. Ask them to write honest product reviews, and require a link back in the blog article.

## Scholarship Bait

Identify a noble cause (preferably relating to your keyword targets), and create a scholarship program for deserving students. Next, require an essay as part of the application (which will be great content for your blog and ego bait). Then, identify relevant colleges and solicit them to link “out” to your scholarship. It’s a win-win: the student gets a scholarship, and you get links from quality .edu domains to your website.

## Ultimate (Free) Guide Bait

An ultimate guide or free eBook can be excellent link-bait. Write the definitive eBook on “top ten new technologies” for your industry, write a provocative FAQ document with “how to” templates, or tell an emotional story. HubSpot has done a fantastic job of this. Check out their eBooks at <http://jmlinks.com/38p>.

## Badge Bait

Consider creating **badges**: customer of the month, the best tool for such-and-such, partner companies, verification of a certification test, and so on and so forth.

Have you ever noticed how many Yelp results show up high on Google search? Have you ever thought of how many companies have Yelp badges on their websites, with links up to their Yelp listings? Now that you know something about link-building, you can see that Yelp is surreptitiously tricking businesses to link “up” to Yelp.com. The small business webmaster who posts a link to his Yelp listing, saying, “Check us out on Yelp,” is sending link juice “from” his website “to” Yelp. Yelp, in summary, uses a **link-bait strategy** to manipulate Google.

Consider being the “Yelp” of your industry via badges. Here’s a screenshot giving an inside look at how Yelp promotes its link juice via badges:

**yelp** for Business Owners

## How can I link to reviews of my business on Yelp?

You have a website. You want to show off your Yelp love. Just copy the HTML code next to any one of the review counter graphics will automatically update your count every time one of our Yelpers posts a review.

Permalink to <http://www.yelp.com/business-repair-new-york-2>



Plain Button Link

```
<div id="yelp-biz-badge-plain-VbXsUWCDtq6gJ8bkDKEmuQ">
<script type="text/javascript">
var js;
```



Five Stars Counter

```
<div id="yelp-biz-badge-fsc-VbXsUWCDtq6gJ8bkDKEmuQ">R
<script type="text/javascript">
var js;
```

You can view the Yelp badge system at <http://jmlinks.com/7f>. Note: if you use “badge bait,” be Penguin-aware. Make sure to **vary the inbound link text** and structure across your badges so as to not trigger a Penguin penalty. For example, the ALT image attribute for some badges would have keyword No. 1, others keyword No. 1, others just your company name, etc.

### Widget Bait

If you have a programming budget, create **widgets** such as BMI calculator, the real-time price of gold, a reverse mortgage calculator. Any sort of free tool or widget that is relevant to your industry can be link bait to bring in links in a spontaneous way. Kitco, a company that sells gold, silver, and platinum bullion, for example, has an example of “widget bait” at <http://www.kitconet.com/>. **Infographics** are another way to get links: create an informative, humorous, outrageous, or shocking infographic and let the links roll in!

Your fourth **TO-DO** is to have a company meeting and brainstorm possibilities for link bait. If you see opportunities, create a step-by-step plan to implement your link bait strategy. Notice as well that what constitutes “link bait” is also fabulous for social media sharing.

## »»» CHECKLIST: LINK-BUILDING ACTION ITEMS

Test your knowledge of link-building! Take the *link-building quiz* at <http://jmlinks.com/qzln>. Next, here are your link-building **Action Items**:

- Understand** the **basics** of links and link-building, specifically - *quantity*, *quality* (optimized links), and *authority* (PageRank or Domain Authority).
  - Be **link-aware** as a company or organization, constantly asking people to “link to you,” as for example when a journalist or blogger writes an article, you participate in a trade show, or you join an industry association, etc.
  - Be also **Penguin-aware** and seek for a “natural footprint” of many links - *naked* (http), *branded* (your company name), and *optimized* (your keywords).
- Create a **link-building system**, going from easy to most difficult -
  - Ecosystem partners** - solicit links from suppliers, friends, colleagues, etc.
  - Social media profiles** - set up, claim, and link from your social media profiles as on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.
  - Industry associations and directories** - inventory and get listed in the “best” industry directories that provide outbound links. Don't forget industry trade associations and other organizations key employees may be members of (e.g., “National Association of Women Small Business Owners,” etc.)

- ❑ Solicit links from **bloggers** - identify and solicit links from relevant bloggers in your industry; consider *guest blogging*.
- ❑ **Non-profits** - identify and sponsor relevant nonprofits with link-backs to your website.
- ❑ **Link-bait** - if possible, generate a “widget” or “badge” or even a long-form blog post as “content bait.” Perhaps a scholarship program. Create content that is “so good” bloggers, and others will spontaneously link to it.

Check out the **free tools!** Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Link-building* section for my favorite free tools for link-building. Just visit **<http://jmlinks.com/seodash>**.

### »»» **DELIVERABLE: A COMPLETED LINK-BUILDING WORKSHEET**

The **DELIVERABLE** for this Chapter is a completed link-building worksheet. For the worksheet, go to **<http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z>** (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “link-building worksheet.”



## 5.2

# SOCIAL MEDIA

A topic unto itself, Social Media has many SEO implications. **Social mentions** - that is, the sharing of your website links on sites like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and more - is a new kind of **link building**. Having robust **social profiles** (like an active *Twitter feed* or active *Facebook Business Page*) signals Google and its search algorithm that your company is active and important. This is called **social authority**. Indeed, *Google My Business* (Google's platform for local businesses) presents unique SEO opportunities, particularly in the area of having a robust corporate profile with many local reviews, as we shall discuss in the next Chapter. In addition, Google's partnership with Twitter is a clear sign that having a robust Twitter profile and having your links "tweeted" is now a must-do. Google also owns YouTube, so it stands to reason that having a popular YouTube Channel might help your SEO.

SEO is going social, so in this Chapter, we explore the brave new world of **Social Media SEO**.

**Let's get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Understand Social Media SEO
- » Get Social Mentions!
- » Set up Robust Social Profiles
- »» Checklist: Social Media Action Items
- »» Deliverable: A Completed Social Media SEO Worksheet

## » UNDERSTAND SOCIAL MEDIA SEO

**Links**, as we have seen, count as **votes** in SEO. Google clearly rewards sites that have many keyword-relevant links (especially those from high authority websites), with higher positions on Google search results. Social Media, in a sense, builds on this network of link authority. How so? While Google has not publicly clarified how it uses what are called *social signals* in SEO, we can postulate some logical patterns of how Google might interpret social signals.

*If Website A has its URL “Tweeted” and Website B does not, then Website A must be more important.*

*If blog post A on trending topic #1 has 12 tweets of its URL, and blog post B on trending topic #1 has 35 tweets of its URL, then blog post B must be more relevant for the corresponding Google search query.*

*If Website A has 20,000 followers on Twitter, and Website B has only 100, then Website A must be more important.*

*If Website A has a YouTube Channel with 10,000 subscribers and a video with 100,000 views, it must be “better” than Website B that has a YouTube Channel with only 100 subscribers.*

*In a nutshell, having your URLs tweeted, shared on YouTube, LinkedIn, or Facebook, or mentioned on other social networks is a form of link-building.*

Evidence that this occurs is visible in how Google quickly figures out trending news. It's common knowledge that the first place people go to for breaking news is Twitter, and accordingly, a quick Google search of a trending topic (try searching Google, for example, for “The Kardashians,” or “Election 2022,” or “iPhone Games”) and you'll often find new and fresh content that is being shared heavily on Twitter.

For instance, here's a screenshot of the search for “wildfire,” showing recent news and tweets about California Wildfires:

Google wildfires

All News Images Videos Maps More Settings Tools

About 105,000,000 results (0.47 seconds)

### Top stories

 <p>'Start Here': Wildfires, Sinema, Stan Lee. What you need to know to start ...</p> <p>ABC News - Go.com 3 hours ago</p>	 <p>California Fire Death Toll Now at 44 With Discovery of 13 More Bodies</p> <p>The New York Times 10 hours ago</p>	 <p>Jimmy Kimmel slams Trump over California wildfire response</p> <p>EW.com 8 mins ago</p>
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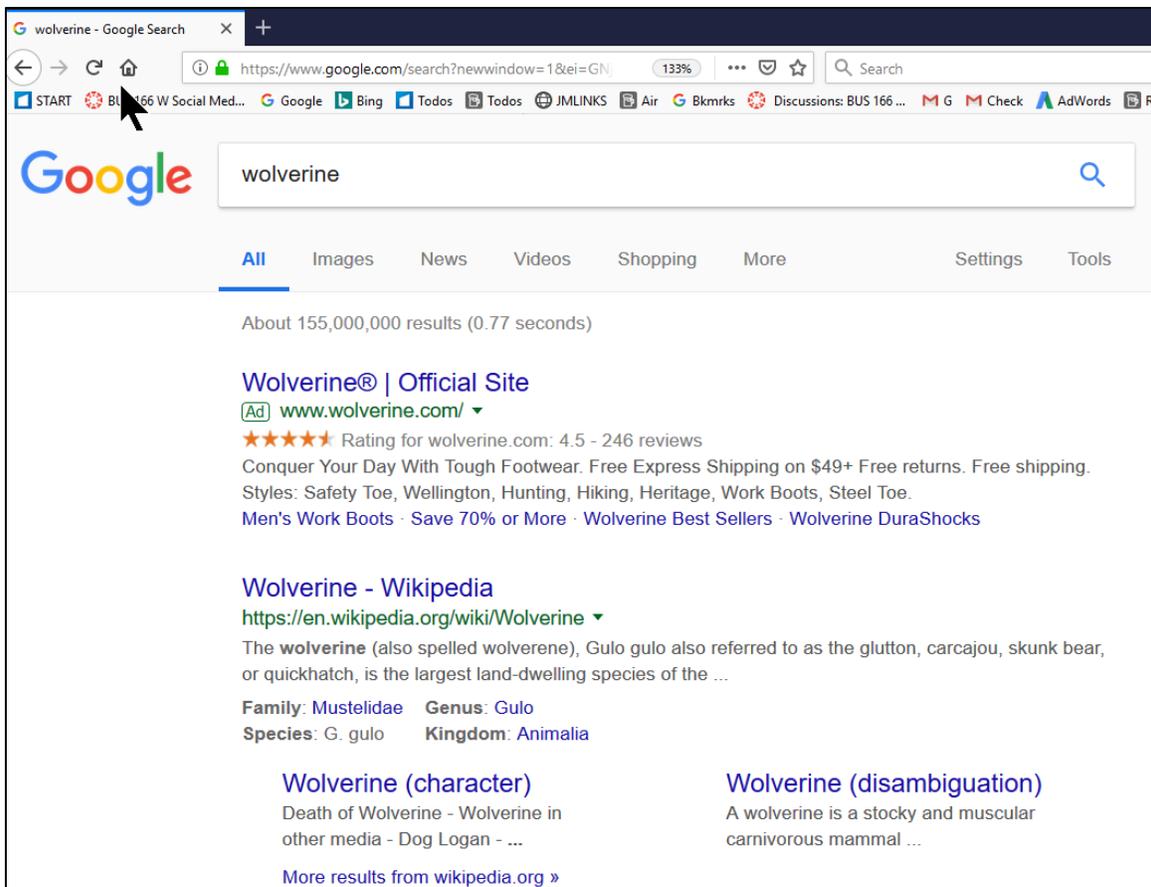
→ More for wildfires

### wildfires on Twitter

<https://twitter.com/search/wildfires>

<p>Miley Ray Cyrus (@MileyCyrus)</p> <p>Completely devastated by the</p>	<p>Gerard Butler (@GerardButler)</p> <p>Returned to my house in</p>	<p>Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump)</p> <p>With proper Forest</p>
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Compare that with a search for “wolverine:”



What these two searches tell us is that – by monitoring social media – Google figures out that the former search is for news and news events, while the latter is a stable search that is definitional in character. Behind the scenes, Google is using social networks like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to “figure out” which searches are time-sensitive and which ones are not. Now, take that a step further, and you’ll realize that many searches are mixed. A search for “iPhone,” for example, is a mixture of stable and news-oriented information. Social media is the intervening factor; the takeaway is that we can influence Google by influencing our social media profiles and buzz.

Another clue is Google’s relationship with Twitter. Google has a formal partnership of Twitter in which Google gets the first crack at the Twitter “firehose” of breaking news. It stands to reason, therefore, that having your URLs shared on Twitter might help them for SEO purposes.

How does social media impact SEO?

First and foremost, sites that enjoy **inbound links via social mentions of URLs** from social sites like Twitter, LinkedIn, or even Facebook are clearly topical and relevant to Google. A simple *site:twitter.com* search on Google reveals over 399 million indexed Tweets, and a simple *site:facebook.com* search on Google reveals over 1.4 million indexed Facebook posts.

Google clearly pays attention to the social sharing of links!

## **SOCIAL SHARES ARE THE NEW LINK-BUILDING!**

Second, robust and active **social profiles** are another obvious clue to Google of your website's relevance. Many sites link out to their Yelp account, Twitter account, Facebook page, LinkedIn page, etc., and those social sites can be indexed by Google. Google can clearly “see” how active your company is on social media, how many “followers” you have, and whether those followers, in turn, are active and/or important. Most importantly, Google can “count” your “reviews” on Google My Business, Yelp, YellowPages, and other local review sites.

(**Note:** we discuss the impact of reviews in the next Chapter, 5.3 on “Local SEO”).

It stands to reason that having an active social media footprint, with active posts, many engaged followers, and many reviews, is a new signal to Google about your website's relevance. Indeed, much of this is keyword-centric, another reason why knowing your keywords is paramount to SEO success!

Third, social search has made the Web more **human**. Whereas in the past, the creators of Web content were relatively invisible, new ways of communicating “microdata” can tell Google how many reviews your site has, who the content author is, and whether this author has an active, engaged follower community or not. Realizing that SEO is now a **social game** positions your company for not just the present but the future of SEO success on Google.

**Note:** this Chapter focuses on using social media for SEO purposes. For social media marketing in its own right, please see my *Social Media Marketing Workbook*, available on Amazon at <http://jmlinks.com/smm>.

To be clear, remember that “traditional links” remain far, far more important than social shares to this day: so if you have to choose between a “traditional link” (e.g., from a blog post) and a “social share” (e.g., the Tweeting of your URL), choose the former. **Links still remain the dominant currency of SEO, worth far more than social media shares!**

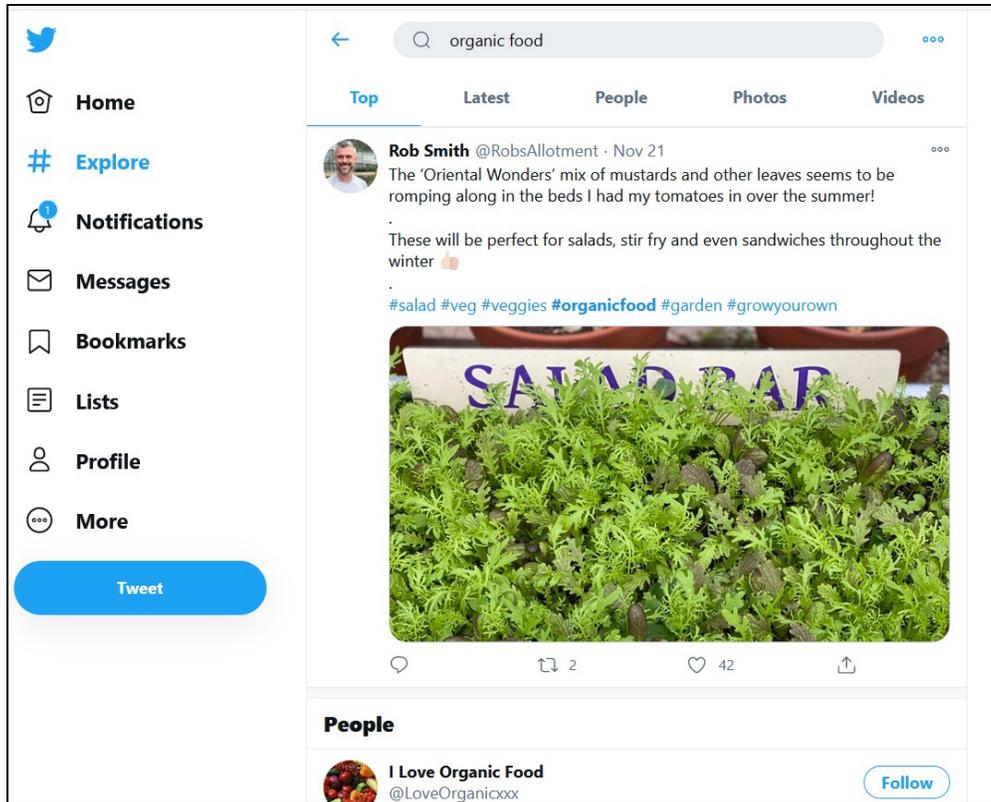
## » GET SOCIAL MENTIONS!

Getting **social mentions** of your URLs is a lot like traditional link building. First, look for easy social mention targets. Ask customers, suppliers, and ecosystem partners to tweet your URLs, share your company’s blog posts on Facebook, and “like” them on Facebook. Second, “reverse engineer” competitors or use common Google and social media searches to find social media sharers who might be interested in your content.

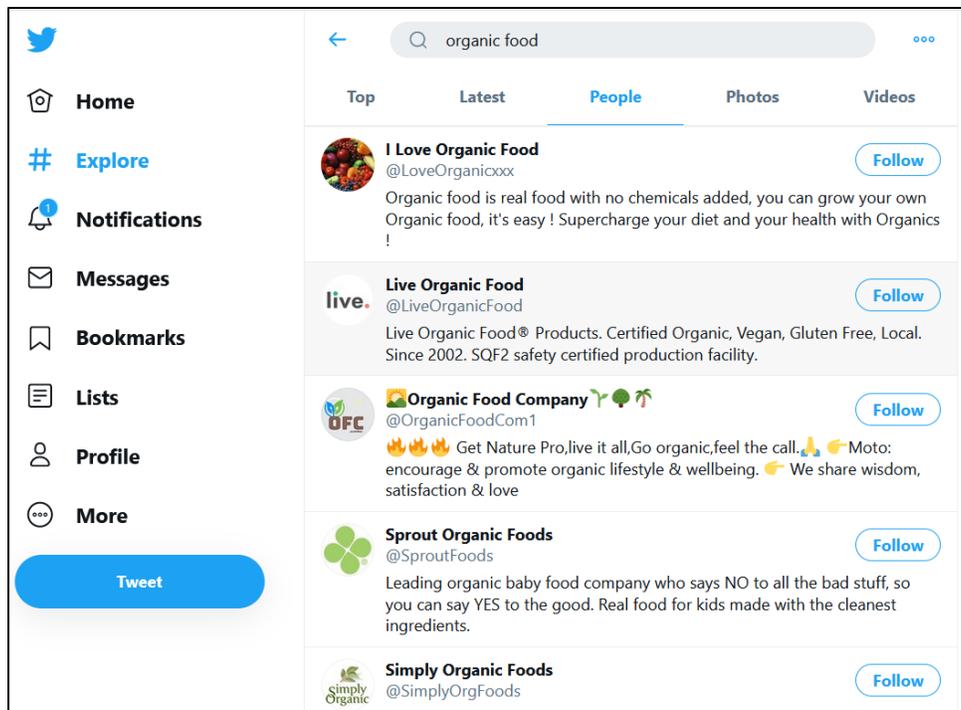
### Get Tweeted

In this regard, Twitter is the most important network for SEO purposes. You want to not only set up your business Twitter account and tweet out your own URLs (e.g., a new blog post or new press release). You also want to get real people on Twitter to tweet those URL’s, too.

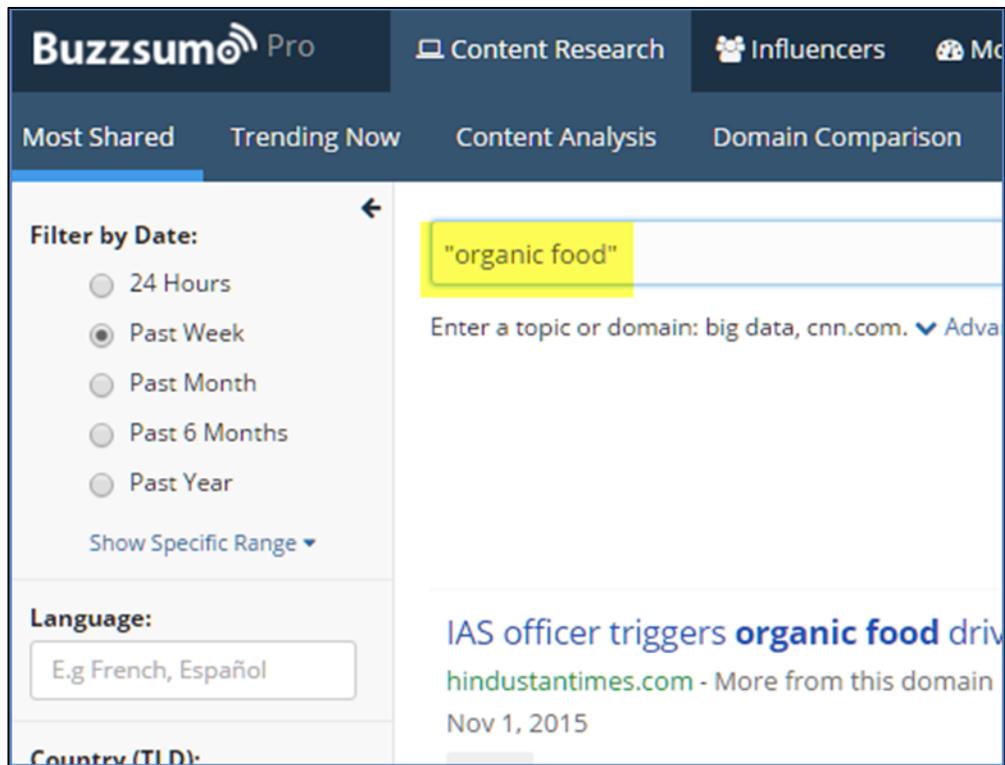
To find people Tweeting on your keywords, go to Twitter advanced search at <http://jmlinks.com/14w>, type in your competitor names or your keywords and look for Tweepers who have a) many followers, and b) tweet on your keyword themes. Then reach out to them and encourage them to tweet your latest blog post, press release, or informative new widget. Here’s a screenshot showing a search for tweets on “organic food”:



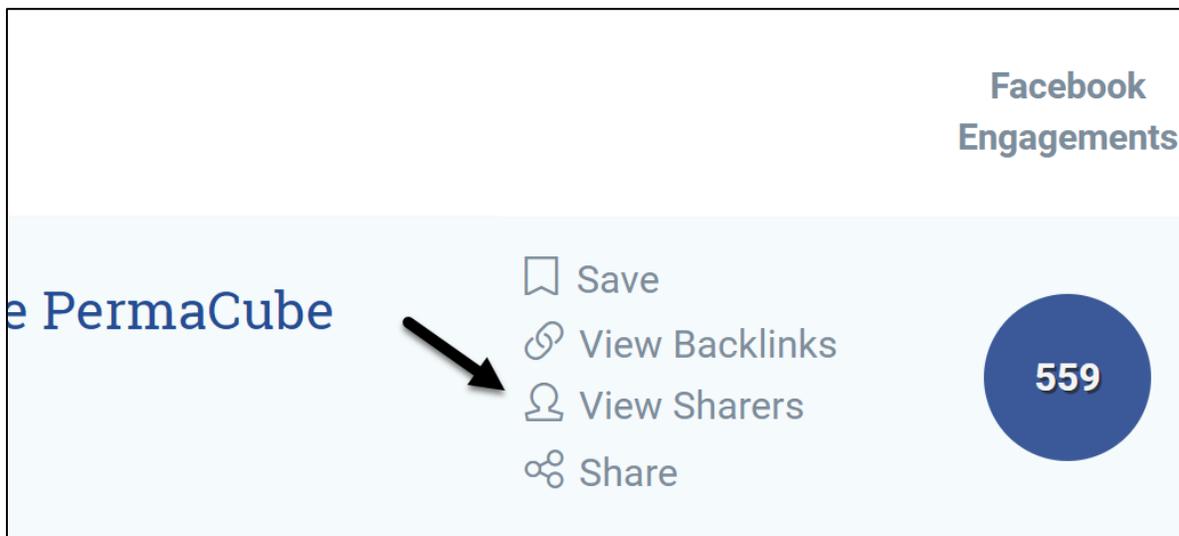
Note how you can click into “people” to find “people” who are powerful in the Twitosphere and sharing content on that keyword. Here’s a screenshot of that:



Second, you can use Buzzsumo (<http://www.buzzsumo.com>) to identify social shares of your keywords. Here's a screenshot:



Inside Buzzsumo, you can click on “View sharers” to find the Twitter accounts of people who shared a piece of news. Here’s a screenshot:



Buzzsumo is a paid tool with limited free search capability. That said, you can sign up for a free trial account and/or pay for just one month and export data about the key folks on Twitter who share content relevant to your business.

Third, you can use websites that track hashtags. (Hashtags are content themes on social media). For example, check out *DisplayPurposes.com* (<https://displaypurposes.com/>) and look for *#hashtags* that are similar to your keywords. (Note do not use spaces when researching hashtags, so it's *#organicfood*, not *#organic food*). You can then also look for the top Twitter accounts for those hashtags. Here's a screenshot:



Finally, if you've written a blog post on a trending topic, consider advertising on Twitter, Facebook and/or LinkedIn to get it "picked up" while still timely, thereby encouraging more "free" shares of your URL.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on how to get "social mentions" at <http://jmlinks.com/17v>.

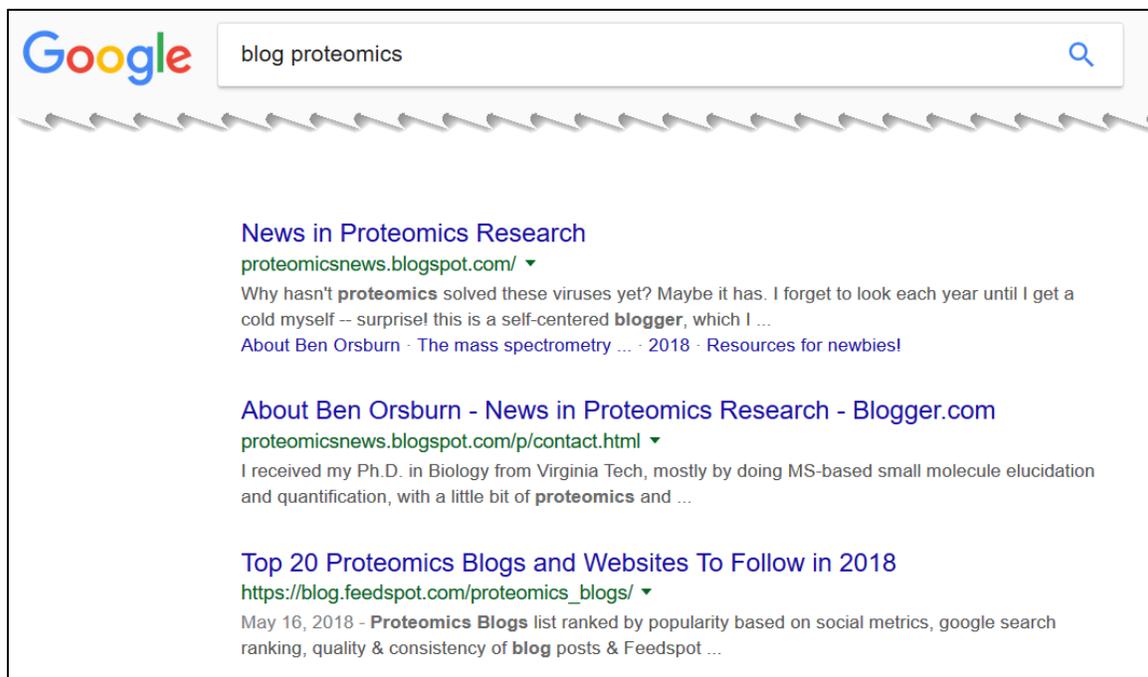
Don't forget that Google is another great way to search other social media sites for heavy sharers. Try Google searches like *site:facebook.com {your keywords}*, *site:linkedin.com {your keywords}*, *site:pinterest.com {your keywords}*, etc. to identify site-specific individuals who are good targets to share your own content. For example, go to Google and type

in: *site:facebook.com* “organic food” to see recent content on “organic food” shared on Facebook.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video tutorial on how to use the site: command to identify social sharers at <http://jmlinks.com/16g>.

## Reach out to Bloggers

Don't forget blogs and bloggers! Go to Google, type in your keywords plus the word “blog,” and look for relevant blogs. For example, type into Google: “blog proteomics” to find blogs that cover the fun-filled world of *proteomics*. Here's a screenshot:



Social Searcher (<http://jmlinks.com/51w>) is an innovative search engine that focuses specifically on social media content. Take a target keyword such as “organic food,” enter it into the search engine, and quickly find posts on that topic. Social search engines allow you to quickly and efficiently find out who's talking about, commenting on, and

sharing your keywords on social networks like Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn. You can then reach out to the social influencers and promote your own content.

**Bloggers** are very important targets because a link in a blog post is a real, traditional, SEO-friendly link, blog updates signal to Google new, fresh content, and bloggers are often quite active on Twitter and other social media networks. Blogs are the gold standard, in other words, of social mentions, so always be on the lookout for bloggers.

As you reach out for links and social mentions, focus on win-win opportunities. For example, if you sell products, send out product samples to key bloggers, Tweeters, and Facebookers and ask them for honest product reviews, “tweets” of your URLs, and “shares” of your links on Facebook or Twitter in exchange for samples.

*(Remember, however, that – technically speaking – any type of link-building outreach is a violation of Google terms of service so be judicious, and act at your own risk, and be aware that sending out product samples requires FTC notice to be placed on any blog posts.)*

Your first **TO-DO** is to open the “Social Media SEO worksheet” and complete the section entitled “social sharers.” For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “Social Media SEO worksheet.”

## » SET UP ROBUST SOCIAL PROFILES

In addition to trying to get people to tweet or share out your URLs, it’s a no-brainer that Google looks for companies with robust social pages. Given two companies competing for a top position on Google, one with thousands of people following its Twitter feed and another without a Twitter account at all, which company do you think is going to win top placement on Google? This same fact probably goes for other social networks as well, especially ones like Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, or Pinterest that are open to the Google crawler, at least at the account level. (Facebook is closed to Google at the so-called “registration wall.”)

For each social media network, be sure to fill out your company pages with relevant keywords and cross-link from each social profile to your website. Here are the most important for most companies with links to their business help guides (if available):

**Facebook** (<https://www.facebook.com/business>)

**Instagram** (<https://business.instagram.com/>)

**Twitter** (<https://business.twitter.com/>)

**LinkedIn** (<http://jmlinks.com/14x>)

**YouTube** (<http://jmlinks.com/7j>)

**Pinterest** (<http://business.pinterest.com/>)

Once you set up a business page, be sure to populate your company description with your relevant keywords and cross-link it back to your website. Be sure to also link from your homepage to your social network pages to make it easy for Google to see which website corresponds to which social network. All of the networks have easy-to-use badges that enable these important **cross-links**; just look for badges in the relevant business help center as listed above. Be sure to be consistent about your physical address, telephone number, and website address.

Next, start **posting** and **sharing content**. Obviously, it's better if you get real social engagement, but for SEO purposes, you want to at least post something. A simple model is to take your monthly blog posts and tweet out the blog post URLs to your Twitter account, Facebook Page, LinkedIn company page, etc. You can use a scheduling program like Hootsuite (<https://hootsuite.com>) to schedule these in advance. Your objective is to get your URLs out into social media, at least on your own account, if not on the “real” accounts of influencers on social media.

You also want to build **followers**. The more followers you have on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc., the more important you appear to Google. Ask customers, friends, family, business colleagues, neighbors, random street people, and anyone else to “follow” you on Twitter, Facebook, etc., so as to build up the numeric quantity of followers. Yes, it would be awesome if you were really engaged on social media, but for all intents and purposes on SEO, it's just about raw followers and raw shares of your Web content. Google isn't a person, and it isn't so much interested in the quality as in the quantity of your presence on social media.

## Twitter and Youtube

The two most important platforms for SEO are a) Twitter, and b) YouTube. Why? Twitter is where people go to share “what’s happening,” and they often share outbound links to key websites. Twitter is totally open and crawlable by Google; Google can “see” what is going on on Twitter. YouTube is owned by Google. Again, Google can see follower counts, engagement, video views, etc. If you have limited time and resources, focus on Twitter and YouTube. Set up robust profiles, tweet or share your own URLs, and encourage other YouTubers or Twitterers to share your content.

## Posting SEO-friendly Content

Finally, as you post content to a social network, keep your keywords in mind, grow your fan base, and encourage interactivity between you and your fans. Social media is a two-for-one benefit: first, the *direct* benefit from the social media platform itself as you engage with users, and second, the *indirect* benefit as Google “observes” how popular you are and feeds that data into its SEO algorithm.

Your second **TO-DO** is to open up the “Social Media SEO worksheet” and complete the section “Social Media Profiles.” For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “Social Media SEO worksheet.”

## »» CHECKLIST: SOCIAL MEDIA ACTION ITEMS

Test your knowledge of social media for SEO! Take the *social media for SEO quiz* at <http://jmlinks.com/qzss>. Next, here are your social media **Action Items**:

- Identify **influencers** or **superfans** who can “share” your content, especially on Twitter. Create a list of “key influencers” such as bloggers, persons on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc., and have an outreach strategy to alert them to key content.

- ❑ Use “Advanced Search” on Twitter, Buzzsumo.com, and/or Displaypurposes.com to build out your influencer list.
- ❑ Use Google search for “blog” plus your keywords to identify influential bloggers.
- ❑ Set up robust **Social Profiles** on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc., and populate them with links back to your website. (If you’re a local business, see the next Chapter on Google My Business and local SEO.)
- ❑ Set up Hootsuite or Buffer to manage your social shares, and begin populating them - at a minimum - with content from your blog.

Check out the **free tools!** Go to my *Social Media Dashboard* for my favorite free tools on social media marketing. Just visit **<http://jmlinks.com/smmdash>**.

### »»» **DELIVERABLE: A COMPLETED SOCIAL MEDIA SEO WORKSHEET**

The **DELIVERABLE** for this Chapter is a completed “Social Media SEO worksheet.” For the worksheet, go to **<http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z>** (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “Social Media SEO worksheet.”



## 5.3

# LOCAL SEO & REVIEW MARKETING

Let's suppose you have a restaurant, or you're a local plumber, dentist, CPA, divorce attorney, or any of the thousands of local businesses that service customers in their day-to-day life. Before the advent of social media sites like Yelp, Google, YP.com, Airbnb, TripAdvisor, and their kind, consumers might have gone to the physical yellow pages or perhaps visited your website after a Google search. You were in charge of your marketing message; *your customers couldn't really "talk back."*

The "Review Revolution" led by Yelp and since followed by Google, YP.com, Airbnb, TripAdvisor, Angie's List, Amazon, Facebook, and other sites, dramatically changed the local landscape. A happy customer could leave a **positive** review of your business, and a not-so-happy customer could leave a scathingly **negative** review.

*Reviews, in short, allow consumers to talk back: the good, the bad, and the ugly. And the just plain crazy.*

Moreover, it's not just that customers *leave* reviews. It's that customers *read* reviews; they rely on reviews when making judgments about which businesses to patronize. If they see five-star or four-star reviews on Google or Yelp, they may reach out to your business with a phone call or email inquiry or visit your restaurant, bar, or coffee shop. If they see two-star or negative reviews on Yelp, Google, or other local review sites, they may skip over you and go to competitors who have better online reviews.

*Online reviews, in short, can make, or break, your local business.*

Using Yelp and Google as models, this Chapter explores the “Review Revolution.” While the focus will be primarily on *local* businesses, it’s a fact that the “review revolution” impacts any business in which customers Google the business name plus “reviews” prior to making a purchase, which is pretty much all businesses.

**Let’s get started!**

### **TO-DO LIST:**

- » Explore How Review Sites Work
- » Inventory Companies on Yelp, Google, or Other Relevant Sites
- » Claim and Optimize Your Listings
- » SEO Your Local Website
- » Cultivate Positive Reviews
- » Monitor and Improve Your Online Reputation
- » Measure your Results
- »» Checklist: Review Action Items
- »» Deliverable: A Local SEO Marketing Plan

### **» EXPLORE HOW REVIEW SITES WORK**

In October 2004, Yelp (<https://www.yelp.com>) was founded. Consumers could now review not just local restaurants but plumbers, dentists, massage therapists, and thousands of other types of local businesses. Google reviews followed soon after, as did reviews on sites like TripAdvisor, NextDoor, VRBO, AVVO, etc. The Review Revolution was like any other mass revolution: the masses burst open the doors of the castle, turned over the table and chairs, and even executed the “ruling class.” *It was a bit bloody. It was a bit noisy. And it was a bit unpleasant.* If, for example, you were the restaurant critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, your absolute power over restaurants was broken. The

Review Revolution brought democracy to local reviews. Now *anyone* could review *anything*. Say “bye-bye” to the review aristocracy and “hello” to review by the masses.

And this didn’t just happen on Yelp. It happened to books on Amazon, to apps on the Apple App Store and Google Play, to music on streaming platforms, to movies on the IMDB archive, and on and on. And, most importantly, **Google** jumped in with its own reviews, and today, throughout the country and indeed throughout the world, the “**Google reviews**” of your local business can make or break your profits.

But here’s the rub. Like the French Revolution, the Review Revolution brought the masses into the ecosystem. It has not been very organized or coherent; online reviews run the gamut from informative to ridiculous, from true to faked. Whereas the big reviewers of the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *New York Times* were educated and civilized (though they could be brutal in their reviews), the new review class can be rough and tumble. Anyone – and I do mean anyone – can write a review: good, bad, or ugly. And let’s not forget: *just plain crazy*. To be frank, we are still living in this unsettled Review Revolution, and like the French Revolution, there is no going back: the old system is dead.

## UNDERSTAND THE REVIEW REVOLUTION

You’ve probably already grasped that online reviews can make or break your local business performance. Many, if not all, potential customers consult online review sites like TripAdvisor, Airbnb, Yelp, or Google before engaging with local businesses. If they see *positive* reviews, they are primed for a *positive* experience. If they see *negative* reviews, they are so *negatively* primed that they may avoid any contact whatsoever with your business. Reviews now impact all types of local businesses; nearly every local business is being reviewed online 24/7 365. And products are being reviewed on Amazon, employers are being reviewed on Glassdoor.com, and nearly every business (even B2B businesses) are being reviewed via Google “reputational searches,” that is when prospects simply Google your company name plus the word “reviews,” as for example, “Geico reviews” or “Zoho reviews” on Google.

## The Review Ecosystem

Reviews are a fact of life, but how do reviews work? Let's step back for a moment and ponder the **review ecosystem**. With Yelp as the most important independent local review site, we will use Yelp as our model and recognize that what's true for Yelp is generally true for all review sites because they all follow the same social media rules of engagement. (Most of this also applies to reviews on Google, which is now far and away the #1 site for consumer reviews online.)

Here's how review sites work:

1. **Businesses have listings.** Business listings are created *without the permission or participation of the business owner* and exist whether or not the business owner has claimed, optimized, or participated in the review ecosystem. *You, as the business owner do not have the right to "delete" your listing on a review site!* It's like a business Page on Facebook, to the extent that your business has an online "Page" on Yelp, Tripadvisor, Healthgrades, etc. But unlike on Facebook, you are not in control!
2. **Customers write reviews.** Registered Yelp users (or Google users, or Airbnb users, or Glassdoor users, etc.) are able to write reviews about any business they choose. *If your business is not listed, users can even create a listing for your business and then review it.* These reviews may be good or bad, extremely positive or so negatively scathing as to infuriate you as the business owner. The Yelpers are basically in control, not the businesses.
3. **Customer reviewers also establish reputations.** The more reviews a customer writes, the older his or her profile as a reviewer on Yelp, the more friends on Yelp, the more thumbs up or thumbs down to their reviews, the stronger their profile gets. Yelp has filters to filter out "fake" or "weak" reviews from showing entirely. The stronger the customer profile, the higher their reviews rise on the pages of those businesses that they have reviewed. Your business and the Yelpers are both simultaneously establishing a reputation, and that reputation impacts whether your information (your listing, their review) shows prominently on Yelp. (Remember: the same is true for Google, TripAdvisor, Airbnb, and even Amazon).
4. **Businesses establish a reputation.** As your business is reviewed on Yelp, the more positive reviews it has, the more customers see it prominently in the search results, and the more come to visit it (especially first-time customers). But the

more negative reviews you have, the less you're seen in search, and the fewer customers you get. This is called a "virtuous circle" and a "vicious circle."

5. **Prospective customers read reviews.** Potential customers visit sites like Yelp, CitySearch, TripAdvisor, Google, and search for businesses via keywords. They find businesses of interest and read the reviews. Generally speaking, people believe reviews, especially if there are a lot of them, and even if they do not know the reviewer personally (which they generally don't). This is called "stranger marketing." Reviews thus function as a "trust indicator":
  - a. **Positive reviews** incrementally help your business to get new customers;
  - b. **Negative reviews**, however, can have a disproportionately devastating impact on your business.
6. **Businesses claim their local listings.** Businesses have the right to claim and optimize their listings. By claiming its listing on a site like Yelp, a business can "optimize" it by improving the business description with accurate keywords, uploading photos, responding to reviews, and in some cases as on Google posting social updates. While businesses cannot delete their listings nor their negative reviews, they can participate in the new social media ecosystem of reviews.

Another major point to grasp is the "**virtuous circles**" and "**vicious circles**" of review marketing: the *more* positive reviews you have, the *more* likely you are to rank at the top of new customer searches (and thus get *more* customers and *more* positive reviews), while the *fewer* reviews you have and/or the *more negative* reviews you have, the *less* likely you are to rank at the top of new customer searches (and thus get more customers). And yet still another key point: the **official policy** of all the review sites is that you, as a business, should not even so much as ask for reviews. You, Mr. or Mrs. Business Owner, are supposed to do nothing: just passively wait for customers to thumb you up or thumb you down.

For an overview of Yelp by Yelp, visit <http://www.yelp-support.com/>. For your first **TO-DO**, sign up for a Yelp account (as a consumer, not a business) if you do not already have one. Next, go to Yelp (<http://www.yelp.com/>) to explore some of the following categories in your local city by typing these keywords into the Yelp search box:

*Sushi Restaurants*

*Jazz*

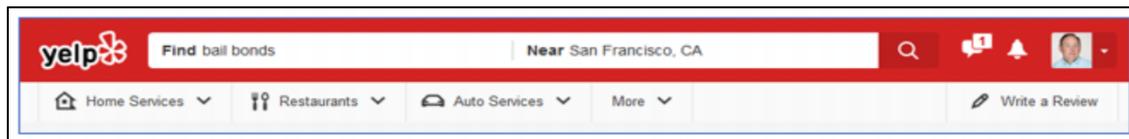
*Plumbers*

*Divorce Attorneys*

*DUI Attorneys*

*Bail Bonds*

Let's take Bail Bonds, for example. Here's a screenshot of a search for "bail bonds" near San Francisco, CA:



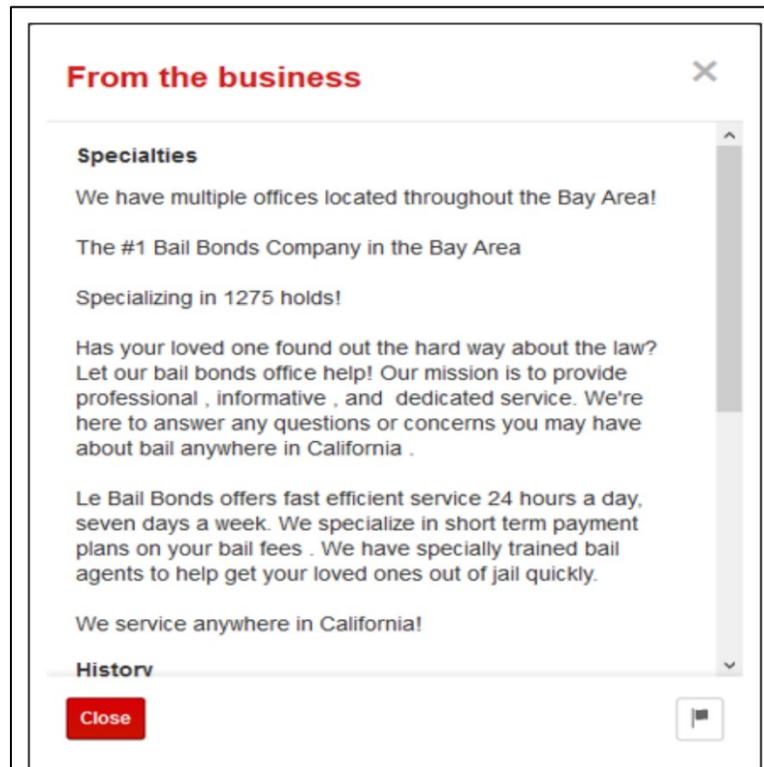
Use the clickable links below to do the search:

- Here's a search for "Bail Bonds" near San Francisco, CA at <http://jmlinks.com/4i>.
- And here's one of the top search results: *Le Bail Bonds* at <http://jmlinks.com/32k>. (There's something so classy about being bailed out of jail by the French).

Here are some things to notice about the *Le Bail Bonds* listing.

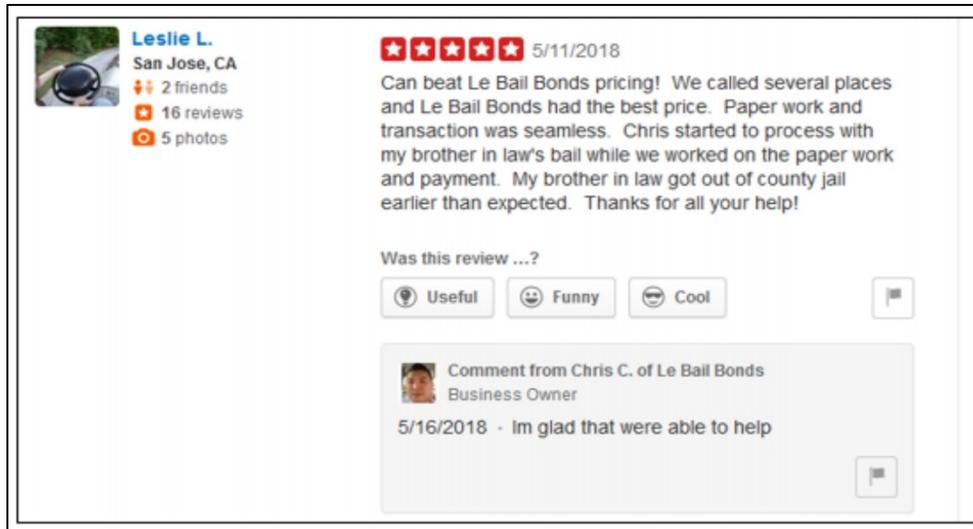
First, scroll down about halfway and look for "From the business" in red. It starts with "We have multiple offices." This is the **business listing**, as edited and submitted by

the business. This indicates that this business has claimed its listing. (You'll also see a blue "Claimed" checkmark next to the business name). Note the inclusion of relevant keywords, the types of search queries users might type into Yelp. Here's a screenshot:

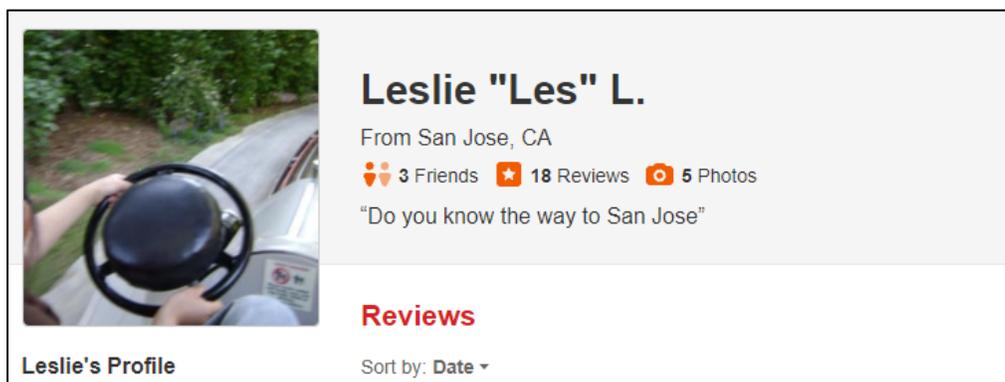


Second, notice the **photos** at the top of the listing at <http://jmlinks.com/32m>. Click on the photos, and notice how they are "keyword-heavy," including the phrase "bail bonds" and the location "San Francisco." These can be submitted either by the business or by users. So, if you don't submit photos, your users might (and they might be favorable, or unfavorable, to your business).

Third, read some of the **reviews**. Notice that for any individual reviewer, Yelp indicates how many friends they have on Yelp and how many reviews they have written. For example, here is a screenshot of a review by Leslie L of San Jose, California:



Fourth, click on a **reviewer's photo**, and you'll go up to their **Yelp profile**. For example, click on "Leslie L," and that will get you up to her profile at <http://jmlinks.com/46s>. You can see that Leslie has three friends, has written 18 reviews, and uploaded five photos:



Read her reviews and make a guess as to how "real" and how "unsolicited" her reviews are.

Leaving Leslie aside, it's a fact that some reviews and the reviewers who wrote them will look legitimate, and others might look solicited, paid, or even faked. You'll soon realize that Yelp, like all the review-based sites, is a hodgepodge of unsolicited and

solicited reviews, real and fake reviews, and so on and so forth. To the untrained eye, it can be hard to tell which reviews are truly real and which ones are fake; all the review systems are plagued by fake or paid reviews, even if the average customer is not that aware of this problem.

For example, here's a screenshot of a suspicious review:



Notice how Chloe D, has *zero* friends, has written only *one* review, lives in *Manhattan*, and yet reviewed a *San Francisco* Bail Bonds. Is this a real review? A solicited review? Or a faked review?

Fifth, return to Le Bail Bond's company page on Yelp, scroll to the very bottom, and click on "reviews that are not currently recommended." Yelp has a filter that attempts to filter out "fake" reviews and filter in "real reviews." As of December 2022, you can see that Yelp has filtered out 107 reviews that its algorithm feels are fake and/or solicited. For example, here's a filtered review by David A, who has zero friends and only one review:



Read some of the other “non-recommended” reviews and attempt to guess which ones are truly real and which ones might be fake. Do you think Yelp is doing a good or bad job with its filter? How do the reviews shown prominently compare or contrast with the reviews at the bottom or the reviews that are hidden?

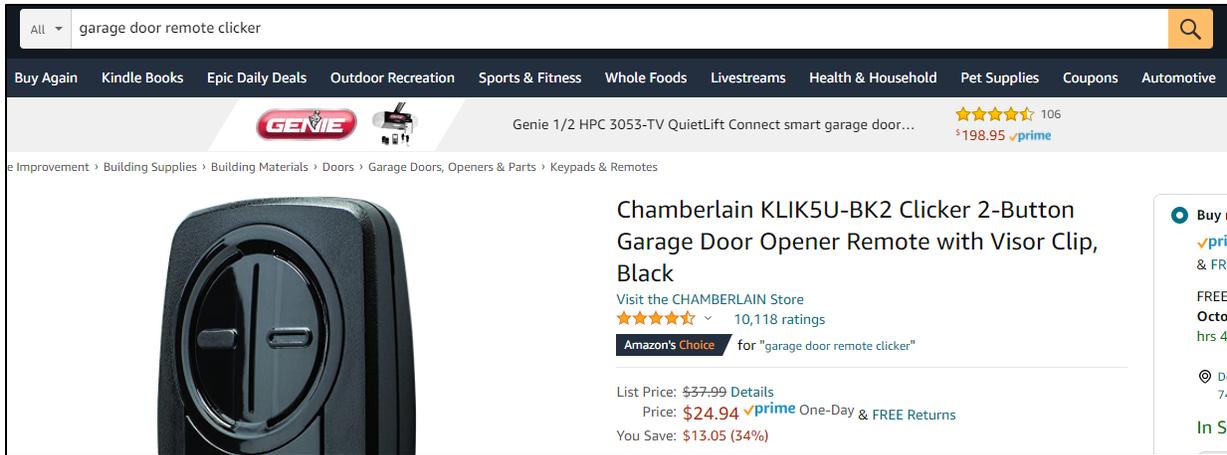
You should quickly realize that the reviews that “stick” tend to be from people with robust profiles, extensive reviews, and a relatively long history on the review site. Their reviews also tend to be beefy and specific, with a lot of content that describes a real experience. The reviews that get filtered out tend to be from people with sparse profiles, few or just one review, and a short history on the review site. The content of the reviews tends to be generic or sparse as well. This isn’t always the case, but this is the general pattern. The artificial intelligence inherent in these review algorithms, in short, is getting better and better at giving top billing to real reviews and filtering out fake reviews. Far from perfect, yes, but that’s the trend.

Now, before you go crazy and start soliciting reviews, keep reading. It’s more complicated than this, but you should begin to see that review marketing – like all of marketing – is a **game** of being pro-active and not passive.

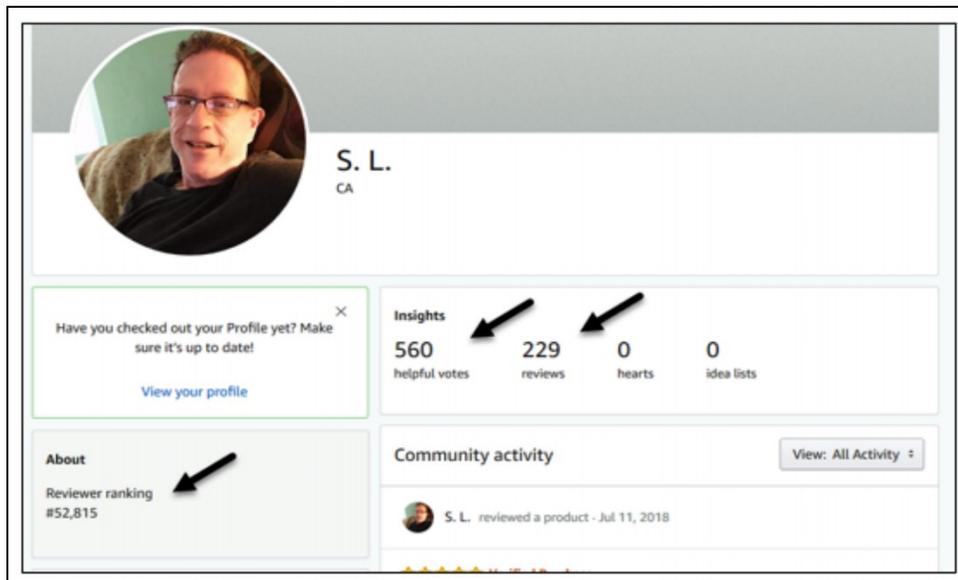
## **Compare Yelp to Other Review Sites**

Reviews do not exist only on Yelp, however. Take any review site (Google, Airbnb, Avvo, Healthgrades, Amazon) and do the same exercise.

For instance, check out some reviews on Amazon, as a contrast to Yelp, by clicking on <http://jmlinks.com/4m> and <http://jmlinks.com/4n>. For example, here’s a screenshot of the #1 ranking *garage door remote* on Amazon, showing it has 10,118 “ratings” or “customer reviews”:



And here's a screenshot of one of the "customer profiles" of a reviewer of the product:



Notice some facts:

- The #1 organic result for "garage door remote" on Amazon has 10,118 ratings.

- The #1 organic result for “garage door clicker” is titled, “Chamberlain Group KLIK3U-BK Clicker Universal 2-Button Garage Door Opener Remote with Visor Clip, Black” – lots of keywords “stuffed” into the product title.
- The customers who are reviewing it are being scored by how robust their profiles are, how many reviews they have written, the age of their profiles, helpful votes by others, etc., and probably (in terms of Amazon) whether they have purchased a lot or not many products on Amazon.

What’s unique about Amazon is that – unlike Yelp or Google – Amazon has data on purchases; that is, Amazon knows whether or not the reviewer actually purchased the product. These are called “verified purchase” reviews on Amazon. In this way, e-commerce sites like Amazon, VRBO, Etsy, or E-Bay have data on dollars that they can feed into their algorithms; Google has no such equivalent, nor does Yelp.

So as you audit and identify the review sites that matter to you, look for differences and similarities to the general patterns. This can impact how you play the game as for example, on Amazon where you need to encourage people who actually purchased your product to write reviews as compared with non-purchasers.

Is the new review system fair? Is it a better opportunity for your business than in 1994, when there were no online reviews? Whether it’s fair or not, good or not, is a different issue than how you as a business can (and should) play the game of reviews to win. You do not make the review world; you simply live in it.

## **LIFE IS NOT FAIR. NEITHER ARE REVIEWS. GET OVER IT.**

None of this is perfect, and I am not singling out Yelp, Amazon, or Google. I am drawing your attention to the Review Revolution and the fact that it is not just real people spontaneously reviewing businesses but rather a mix of people writing real spontaneous reviews, people writing solicited (yet real) reviews, and even fake people writing fake reviews.

## Users Believe Reviews

Users believe online reviews! According to a 2022 BrightLocal study, fully 92% of consumers now read online reviews (vs. 88% in 2014), and 68% say positive reviews make them trust a local business more (vs. 72% in 2014). You can read the full study at <http://jmlinks.com/5b>. Another excellent book on the social aspects of the Review Revolution is Bill Tancer's, *Everyone's a Critic*, available on Amazon.

## Unhappy Small Business Owners

In my face-to-face classes on social media, review sites are among the most controversial. Yelp, in particular, is literally hated by many small businesspeople because a) they have received what they think are unfair negative reviews on Yelp, and b) Yelp has a reputation for strong-arming businesses into paid advertising. (Yelp disputes this charge, though rumors have dogged the company for years – see <http://jmlinks.com/37c>).

Here's why local businesses often get quite emotional about sites like Yelp:

1. Often times, the only reviews they have about their business are negative reviews, which they feel are inaccurate or unfair.
2. They do not understand how to claim or optimize their listings, nor how to respond to reviews.
3. They do not realize that generally, if they do nothing, they are going to get negative reviews disproportionately.
4. They do not realize that there is a small yet very vocal minority of “haters” on reviews sites that troll businesses and write scathing and bitter negative reviews.
5. They do not understand how reviews work and how to influence reviews in their favor.

Moreover, many small business owners do not step back and compare 2023 with 1994. Then, only the rich, famous, connected, or lucky got reviews in the local papers. Getting reviewed was like winning the lottery: great if it happened in a positive way, but not something upon which you could build a marketing strategy. Today, however, any business can get reviews, and consumers can read those reviews online. The reality is that the Review Revolution created an enormous **positive marketing opportunity** for your business.

Let me repeat that:

*The Review Revolution created an enormous positive marketing opportunity for your business!*

You can either be bitter and angry that your business has negative reviews, or you can be positive, learn the game, and start to leverage the unbelievable fact that – today – even “boring” businesses like plumbers, divorce lawyers, or CPAs can get reviews and use review marketing to market their businesses.

### **Who Writes Reviews?**

Let’s talk about who writes reviews. Let’s get real. Let’s assume you are a local plumber. I have a clogged toilet. I go online and find your business. You come out, you fix my toilet, and you give me a bill for \$300. You did a good job, and I am happy with the service.

Will I go online to Yelp and write a review? It’s doubtful. Unlike my relationship with a local French restaurant, I am not “proud” that I have a leaky toilet, and I got it fixed. While I will likely go on Facebook and share a selfie of my wife and me at the local French restaurant and likely go on Yelp and write a positive review to “showcase” how wealthy I am and what a great husband I am, I am not “excited” that you provided me with excellent service with respect to my waste removal system in my bathroom, otherwise known as my toilet. No selfies to Facebook, hopefully, no Snapchat of me on my newly fixed toilet, no positive review to Yelp.

*My toilet has been fixed. I'm happy. Done. Over. End. Writing a review is the last thing on my mind.*

Now, let's say you come out for my toilet repair, and you do NOT do what I consider a good job. Perhaps you crack my tile floor, or perhaps you get dirty water on my rug, or perhaps I just don't like you, or perhaps I find your fee of \$300 unreasonable.

*I'm mad. I hate you. I pay the bill. I'm angry, and I want revenge.*

I think to myself, "I'll show you." I go online and vent my anger in a Yelp review. I explain to fellow Yelpers (and the world) how terrible you are, how they should never use your business, etc., etc. I do this to "let off steam" as well as to "feel good about myself" that I am "doing the world a favor" by righting the wrong of your terrible business. I want you to go out of business. I want you to fail. That's justice to me, the unhappy customer.

Don't believe this happens? Just go to Google and type in *site:yelp.com "worst"*. You'll see 40,500,000 results. You'll see a lot of unhappy, bitter, nasty people on Yelp, and not just for food for every little obnoxious feature of modern life.

Here are the **dirty little secrets** of the review ecosystem (with the possible exception of entertainment venues like restaurants, bars, museums, etc.):

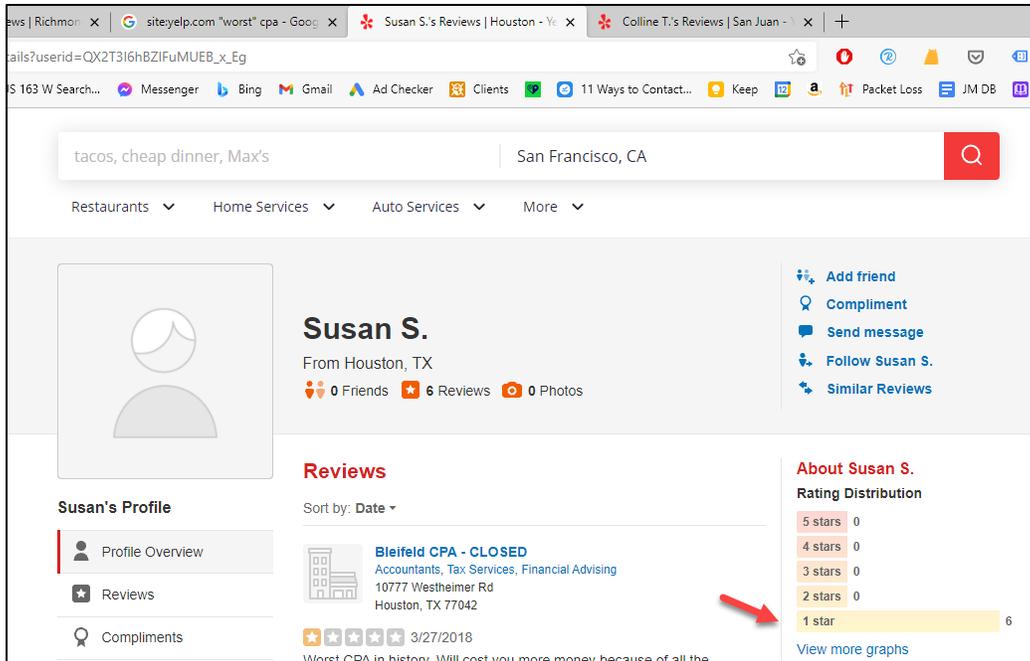
- Consumers **believe** online reviews when making a purchase decision.
- However, outside of "fun" industries like restaurants and entertainment, the **most likely customer to leave an unsolicited review is the unhappy customer**. The very unhappy customer is very likely to spontaneously write a nasty review about your business!
- Outside of "fun" industries, **happy customers are NOT likely to write reviews**. They are not pre-motivated to share their experience with your plumbing company, your CPA firm, your DUI attorney services on Yelp,

Google, or other review sites, without a nudge from you. Outside of “fun” industries, you must solicit reviews from happy customers to succeed.

Two other customer segments are likely to leave reviews.

- **Review geeks / extreme Yelpers** – which would be people like myself, digitally connected, and participatory in the Yelp (or Google, TripAdvisor) ecosystems. Review geeks are not necessarily primed to leave positive or negative reviews. They just tend to review frequently. As Yelp has evolved, more and more people ARE leaving reviews spontaneously about local services, which is a good thing.
- The **hostile minority** - these are unhappy campers who, because of sites like Yelp, now have a way to vent their rage at nearly everything. These “unhappy campers” tend to leave unhappy review after unhappy review: bitter and negative, they tend to hate everything and leave a destructive trail of negative reviews in their wake. Unfortunately, without any fault on its part, Yelp enabled the very unhappy, bitter people of the world to spread their negativity by venting against businesses. Don’t believe me? Try some Yelp searches, look for negative reviews, and click “up” to the profiles of the reviewers. In just a few minutes, I guarantee that you will find people who are consistently harsh in how they review companies.

For example, here’s a screenshot of “Susan S” from Houston who, as of this writing, has six reviews, all one stars:



## UNHAPPY CUSTOMERS OFTEN WRITE REVIEWS

Contrast what you see with “non fun” businesses, with what you see around “fun” businesses like restaurants, bars, or coffee shops. Here, Yelp (and other review sites) leverages the *social media narcissism* so present in our society. Similar to what you see on Facebook, people like to “showcase” their positive achievements. *Look at me! I went to fancy restaurant X, I went out to dinner, I went to this amazing museum, ate at this exclusive diner, drank at this cool bar, smoked cigars at this cool cigar bar, etc.*

For businesses outside of restaurants and the like, the takeaway is the following:

*If you do nothing, the most likely reviews you will get will be negative reviews.*

And another truth. In more and more industries, your competitors are pro-actively soliciting reviews and pretty much getting away with it. So if you are passive, you might have ten positive reviews and a couple of negative ones, but you’ll be competing against

a pro-active business that has forty positive reviews and just a couple of negatives. It's an arms race to get positive reviews.

### **Don't Shoot the Messenger**

Now, don't shoot the messenger. Not every negative review is unjust. Every business will get at least a few negative reviews sooner or later. If you have just a couple, that's OK and normal (compare yourself to other, similar businesses to establish a baseline). But if you're getting negative review after negative review after negative review, you don't have a *Yelp* or *online review* problem; you have a *business* problem. Don't shoot the messenger; the Review Revolution gives you a new window into how actual customers feel about your product, service, or front-line, customer-facing employees.

### **Official Policy**

Now, let's return to the Review Revolution and look at the problem from the perspective of a business owner in some "non-fun" line of business, such as plumbers, CPAs or accountants, divorce attorneys, or roofing companies. You're unlikely to get positive reviews unless you do something proactive. But what's the official policy on reviews?

The official policies of Yelp, Google, TripAdvisor, and the like is that you – as the business owner – are not allowed to solicit reviews in any way, shape, or fashion. Yelp, for example, advises business owners:

*Don't ask customers, mailing list subscribers, friends, family, or anyone else to review your business.* (Source: <http://jmlinks.com/4g>).

TripAdvisor's explanation is one of the most detailed, and you should read it at <http://jmlinks.com/4h>. It's informative and contradictory in that, like all the review platforms, it ignores the fact that the most likely reviews come from unhappy customers and/or the bitter minority of weirdos on the Internet.

Even Amazon has changed its once more lenient policy to one in which it is now taboo to give away free products yet require a review (<http://jmlinks.com/37d>). Similar to Google on link-building, the “official policy” of every major review platform is that you, the vendor, are supposed to do nothing. Customers, however, can pretty much write anything they want: good, ugly, or just plain crazy.

## The Review Dilemma

So here’s the **review dilemma**:

- *On the one hand*, if you do nothing, you are very likely to receive negative reviews from unhappy customers and not so likely to receive positive reviews from happy customers (true in all cases, except perhaps entertainment-type industries), but
- *On the other hand*, the official terms of service forbid you from soliciting reviews from customers.

*Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.*

The reality of the Review Revolution is that in most cases and certainly in competitive industries like divorce law, DUI cases, plumbers, roofers, etc., most successful companies are pro-actively soliciting reviews. This does not mean that they are faking or buying reviews; it only means that they are nudging, cajoling, begging, emotionally incentivizing, and otherwise motivating happy customers to go online and take the time to write positive reviews around their business.

*Is this fair? No.*

*Is this in accord with the terms of service? No.*

*Is it the reality? Yes.*

*Is it the public reality? No. Yelp, Google, TripAdvisor, Amazon, and all the other companies do their best to police reviews, but the reality is that the fact that reviews are heavily manipulated by vendors is an open secret.*

But wait a second.

*Is life fair? No.*

*Was it likely that your plumbing company would have been reviewed in the paper in 1995? No. Your small restaurant? No.*

*Even though the posted speed limit on the highway is 60 mph, do most cars actually go 60 mph? No.*

The Review Revolution has given you an enormous, positive opportunity to reach new customers, just like the Interstate Highway System gives you the opportunity to travel cross-country at 65 to 80 mph even though the posted speed limit may be 75 mph (in the West) and 60 mph (in the East).

*Don't be the fastest car on the road. Don't be the red Mazda Miata going 95 mph in front of the cop. Just be in the fast car group, just not the fastest, most egregious car.*

For now, just understand that **positive reviews are the key to success**, that soliciting reviews is technically against the terms of service, and begin to realize that you are going to have to create a strategy to solicit positive reviews, despite the posted terms of service.

Let's turn, first, to identifying companies to emulate on the various review sites. I'll return after that to dealing with the problem of soliciting reviews without getting into trouble.

## » INVENTORY COMPANIES ON YELP, GOOGLE, OR OTHER RELEVANT SITES

If you are a local business, it will be pretty obvious that reviews matter. Even if you are a national business, however, you should realize that online reviews still matter. (This is because many people will Google your company name plus “reviews” to check out your reputation before completing an important purchase).

Your first step, therefore, is to identify which review sites matter to your business. Your second step is to browse similar businesses on those sites and conduct an inventory of what you like and dislike about their listings, realizing that unlike on Facebook, listings on review sites generally occur with or without the permission of the business. Actual control is much more limited. Your third step is to claim and optimize your listings, and your final step is to create a pro-active system to solicit positive reviews in such a way that you don’t get in trouble with the review platforms.

Among the most important review sites are:

Google (<http://www.google.com/>). Accessibly by doing Google searches on relevant keywords. In some cases, you’ll need to first find a company and then Google its name to find its Google page (more below).

Yelp (<http://www.yelp.com/>) – the largest local review site with great strength in restaurants, more popular in “Blue” states like New York or California than in “Red” states like Florida or Texas.

Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com>). Rather new to the review ecosystem, Facebook is beefing up its reviews of local businesses. See <http://jmlinks.com/37e> for Facebook’s help file on business reviews.

TripAdvisor (<http://www.tripadvisor.com/>). The leading travel review site.

YP (<http://www.yelp.com/>). The traditional yellow pages gone digital.

VRBO (<http://www.vrbo.com/>) – a site for identifying short-term vacation rentals.

Airbnb (<http://www.airbnb.com/>) – the leading site for vacation rentals.

Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com/>) – earth’s largest retailer, with reviews on billions of products.

Glassdoor (<http://www.glassdoor.com/>) – reviews about businesses from the perspective of employees.

Facebook is a special and growing case of reviews. Consumers don’t pro-actively search Facebook (yet) for reviews, but they are beginning to leave them. So Facebook reviews generally function only as “trust” indicators and/or encourage eWOM (electronic word of mouth). To enable Facebook reviews for your business, see <http://jmlinks.com/32p>.

## **IDENTIFY COMPANIES THAT DO REVIEW MARKETING WELL AND REVERSE ENGINEER THEM**

The easiest way to find logical review sites for your company is as follows:

1. Identify the **keywords** by which prospective customers might search for you. For example, if you are a Sushi restaurant in San Francisco, those keywords might be words such as “Sushi,” “Sushi Bar,” “Japanese Restaurant,” “Japanese Caterers,” etc.
2. **Google** those keywords and note which review sites come up.
  - a. Also, try Google searches by keyword plus words like “directory” or “reviews” as for example, “family law attorney directory” or “family law attorney reviews.”
3. Click over to the review sites, and **make a list** of them.
4. Go over to each review site, re-input your search query keywords, and begin to browse company listings on the review sites you have identified.

For example, take “vacation rentals Lake Tahoe” and search it on Google. Also, try “directory of vacation rentals.” Then, browse the search results, and you’ll see sites such as:

<https://www.flipkey.com/>

<http://www.homeaway.com/>

<http://www.vrbo.com/>

<http://www.tripadvisor.com/>

<https://www.tahoeaccommodations.com/>

<http://www.vacationrentals.com/>

<https://www.airbnb.com/>

In this case, you then find out if you already have a listing on each site, if so, claim it, and if not create one, and then optimize it. You then begin to solicit positive reviews on each of the most important sites.

You can also check out Moz’s list of best citations by category at <http://jmlinks.com/46u>. These capture the most common places to be listed, but I recommend that you also pro-actively search Google for “directories” by keyword, as well as browse your competitors to identify industry-relevant sites.

By using this technique, you can quickly make a list of the key review sites that are most relevant to your company.

## **Google is the Most Important Review Site**

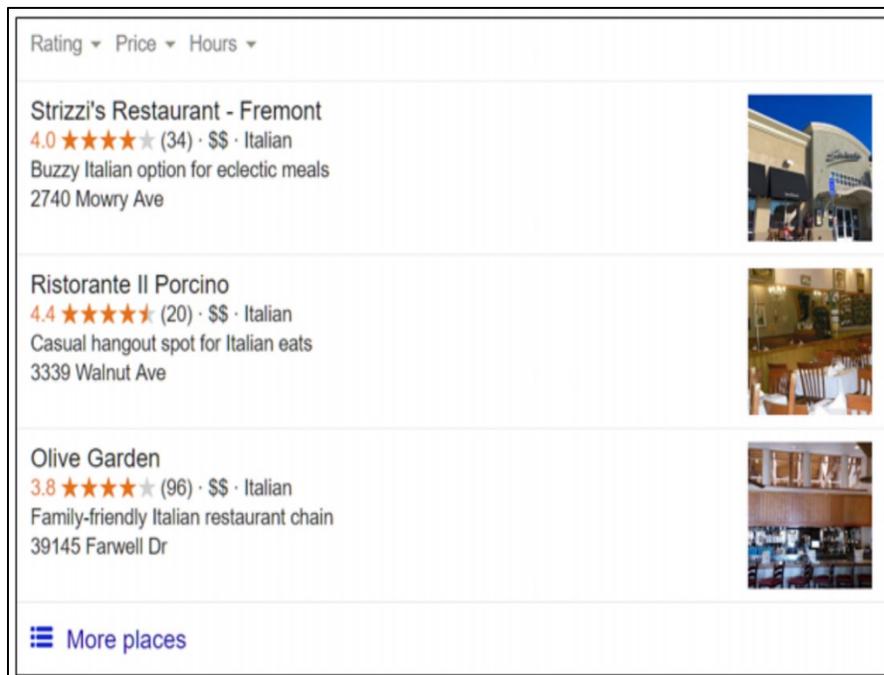
Among listing and review sites, “Google My Business” (GMB) (<https://www.google.com/business>) is the most important by far. First and foremost, it’s owned and operated by Google and has clear priority on Google search.

Having a strong presence via your listing on GMB is the No. 1 way for your business to show on local-related Google searches. It doesn't take much to look forward and realize that if local matters to you and your customers use Google, you'll need to optimize your Google My Business listing! Even if local does not matter to you, try searching for your company name plus "reviews," and your Google My Business listing and reviews will often show up in position #1, but take note of what does show up and begin to claim and optimize other listings as well.

Returning to Google, let's just be honest up front. Google has done a **terrible** job of managing the Google My Business program. They are constantly changing the format, rules, structure, and setup – enough to drive a social media marketer insane! New for 2023: you now manage your Google My Business listing directly by searching for your company name while logged into a Google account (such as a Gmail) that is an "Admin" for the business. It's pretty confusing.

Here's the current setup:

**Consumers simply browse Google.** Consumers simply go to Google, type in keywords such as "Pizza," "Italian restaurants," or "Family Law Attorneys," and see companies show up in the "snack pack," which is the three listings showing (usually but not always with stars). Here's a screenshot:



**Consumers need a Google account to post reviews.** Consumers can post reviews to Google via their Google account. Anyone, however, can read a review.

**Consumers rate businesses.** Consumers rate businesses on a five-star system and can leave detailed reviews (good, bad, ugly) on the system, whether or not the business likes it.

**Businesses can “claim” their Google listings at Google My Businesses.** To “claim” their listings, businesses go to Google My Business at <https://www.google.com/business>, and they can add a description (now invisible to consumers), photos (visible on Google), and respond to reviews.

**Businesses can post announcements to their Google My Business Listing.** Google now allows a local business to make a post to its business, which will show up when someone Google’s the business name as well as often (but not always) when someone does a relevant search on Google, and your business wins a placement on Google Maps. See <http://jmlinks.com/37f> for information on this new opportunity.

Google reviews are critical to success at local SEO. Here’s why:

1. **Reviews drive your company to the top of Google.** The *more* reviews you have on the Google system, the *higher* you show on Google searches for local keywords.
2. **Consumers read and rely on Google reviews**, even if they don't understand where they came from or how to write them. The reality is that while *few* consumers *write* reviews, *many*, if not most, people *believe* them.

## Inventory Companies and Their Local Listings

As you browse local review sites, identify relevant companies and make a list of their listings on Yelp, Google, or other sites that are relevant. Make a note of:

- Does their **listing** appear **claimed**?
- **Photos:** cover photos and profile pictures. Do you like what you see? Why or why not?
- **Reviews.** How many reviews do they have? Are they mostly positive or mostly negative? Click on the reviewers. Do they seem “real”? Unsolicited? Solicited? Faked? Are vendors responding to reviews? Try to reverse engineer how they might be soliciting or encouraging reviews.
- **Questions and Answers.** Google now allows customers to ask questions and vendors to give answers. Do you see this feature in use in your industry?
- **About Tab.** Check out their about tab or listing. Read it. Do you like how it's written? Does it include relevant keywords?

For your second **TO-DO**, download the **Review Research Worksheet**. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “Reviews Research Worksheet.” You'll answer questions as to whether your potential customers are using

reviews, which review sites are important, and inventory what you like and dislike about their review marketing setup and marketing strategy.

## » CLAIM AND OPTIMIZE YOUR LISTINGS

Now that you've identified which local review sites matter, it's time to claim and optimize your listings. All of the sites work in essentially the same way, although there are differences in the details. The basic steps are:

1. Identify the local review site for which you want to “claim” your company listing.
2. Find your listing on the site.
3. Follow the instructions to “claim” it, usually by phone or postcard verification.
4. Optimize your listing description by writing keyword-heavy text, uploading photographs, and populating your listing with your hours of operation and other details.
5. Make sure that your website links back to your listing and your listing links to your website.
6. Make sure that the business name, address, and phone number are the same on both the listing site and your website (be consistent).

### To do this for Yelp:

1. Go to <https://business.yelp.com/> and click “Verify my free listing.”
2. Enter your business name and address and hit **Continue** in red.
3. Follow the instructions to claim your business, usually by phone verification.
4. Once you have claimed your listing:
  - a. Click on Business Information on the left; re-write your description to contain logical keywords that potential customers might search for, including synonyms (*pizza, Italian restaurant, catering*, for example).

- b. Choose relevant categories from the list provided.
  - c. Enter your basic information, hours, specialties (business information), history, and “meet the business owner” with an eye to logical keywords.
  - d. Click on photos on the left, and upload nice photos.
5. Make sure that the address and phone on Yelp are the SAME as the address and phone on your website.
  6. Make sure that your website links to your Yelp listing (usually in the footer), and that your Yelp listing links to your website.

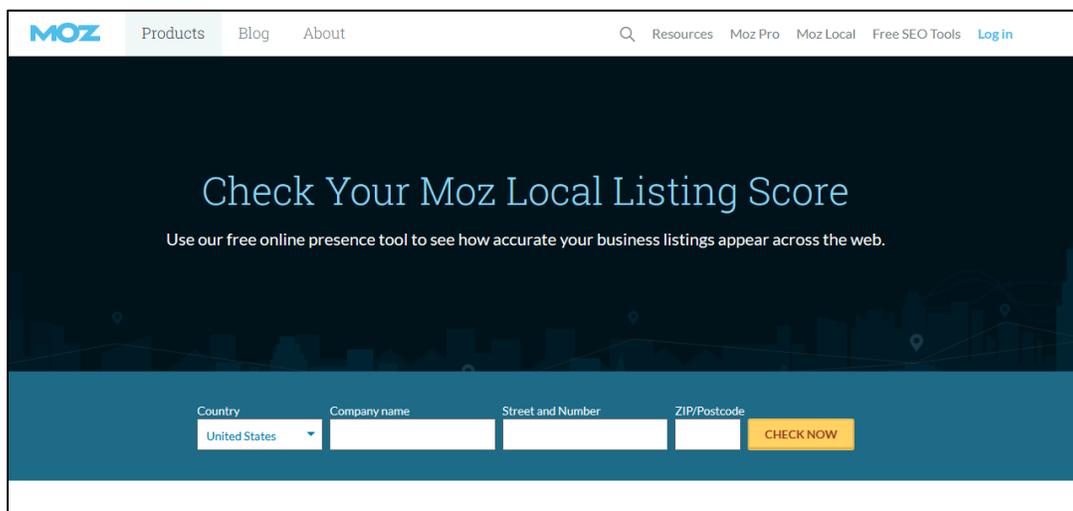
### **To do this for Google:**

1. Sign in to your Google account or Gmail (if you use Gmail).
2. Go to **<https://www.google.com/business>**
3. Follow the instructions to claim your business, usually by postcard verification and sometimes (if you’re lucky) by phone verification.
  - a. When you get the postcard, enter the PIN as indicated in the instructions.
  - b. This will verify your listing and give you control.
  - c. **DO NOT LOSE THE LOGIN EMAIL AND PASSWORD**, as it is very hard to reclaim a listing!
4. Optimize your business description by clicking on “info” in the left column. Using the “pencil” icon, then edit each option.
  - a. **Business name.** Enter your business name. Be aware that business “names” that contain keywords will generally outrank those that do not. If possible, name your business “Jason’s Plumber & Toilet Repair” and not “Jason’s Repair Service” if at all possible.
  - b. **Address.** Enter your correct local address, and make sure it matches the address on your website exactly.
  - c. **Categories.** This is very important – choose highly relevant categories, and fewer are better than more, so be as specific as possible though you must use Google’s pre-set categories. Your main category should be the

one closest to your target keywords; then choose three to five additional categories, but, if – and only if – they are actually relevant to your business.

- d. **Hours of operation.**
  - e. **Phone number.** Do not use an 800 number – use a local number, one that also exists on your website.
  - f. **Website.**
  - g. **Description.** Write a short, keyword-heavy description of your business.
5. Click on “photos” on the left to change your profile picture, and cover photos, as well as add interior and/or exterior photos.

Other local listings like YP.com or Citysearch follow similar procedures. To find all of your “second-tier” listings, you can go to Moz Local Listing at <http://jmlinks.com/56u>. Enter your company name and address. Then click on the “check now” button on the right. Here’s a screenshot:



The screenshot shows the Moz Local Listing Score tool interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the Moz logo and links for Products, Blog, About, Resources, Moz Pro, Moz Local, Free SEO Tools, and Login. The main heading is "Check Your Moz Local Listing Score" with a subtext: "Use our free online presence tool to see how accurate your business listings appear across the web." Below this, there is a form with four input fields: "Country" (a dropdown menu showing "United States"), "Company name", "Street and Number", and "ZIP/Postcode". A yellow "CHECK NOW" button is positioned to the right of the ZIP/Postcode field.

For free, Moz will identify all your local listings. You can then click over to each and claim and optimize each. Or, if you have a budget, you can subscribe to Moz, and they will do this for all local listings **excluding** Google. A competitive service to Moz is Whitespark at <https://whitespark.ca>. Between the two, my preference would be

Whitespark as it seems to be the cheapest, and they do the most meticulous job “by hand,” while Moz and other services are automated.

## **NAP (Name, Address, Phone) Consistency and Google Local Searches**

To show up on Google search, it is important that ALL review sites and your website have the SAME company name, the SAME phone number, and SAME physical address. This is known as “NAP Consistency.” Make sure that your company name, phone number, and physical address appear on your website, usually in the footer.

“Citations” refer to the external listings on review websites that confirm (to Google and Bing) that your business has a certain phone number and physical address. This is used by search engines to filter local search results by their proximity to the searcher or the geographic terms used in the search query.

Using a service like MOZ or Whitespark allows you to claim, optimize, and make this information consistent across hundreds of review sites. This consistency is a big help to showing at the top of local searches on Google or Bing / Yahoo. Regardless of how you do it, try to get NAP consistency between your website, the two most important local review sites (Google and Yelp), and then the 2<sup>nd</sup> tier sites using a service like MOZ or Whitespark (or doing that manually if you’re a glutton for punishment).

## **Organize and Claim Your Local Listings**

For your third **TO-DO**, make a spreadsheet of ALL relevant local review sites. Go to each, and claim / optimize your local listings. Be sure to note your login and password!

- CLAIM YOUR GOOGLE AND YELP WITH A PERMANENT CORPORATE EMAIL (NOT AN EMPLOYEE EMAIL) such as **local@yourcompany.com** or **marketing@yourcompany.com**. If not that, create a Gmail to use for all your local listings.
- **DO NOT LOSE YOUR GOOGLE AND YELP LOGIN AND PASSWORDS!**

**Lost password retrieval** on Yelp and Google is a **disaster!** Neither system has a good password retrieval function; on Yelp in particular, if your password is lost, God help you. Do not lose your passwords! Write them down somewhere where you will be able to find them in a few years.

## » SEO YOUR LOCAL WEBSITE

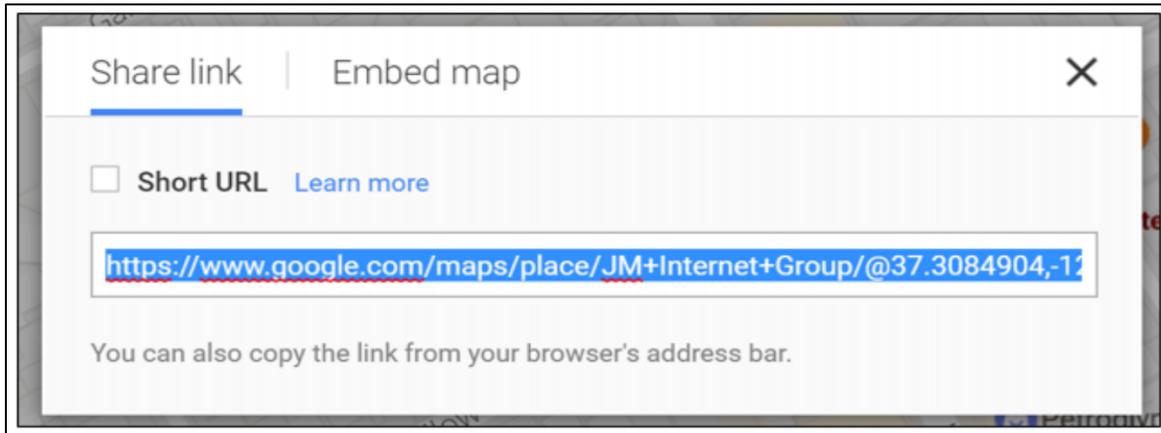
*Local* is an area that crosses both SEO and social media marketing. While you are working on your review marketing efforts, let's review the SEO of your website to make sure that your website SEO and your local review efforts are in harmony:

- **Optimize Your Home Page.** Make sure that your Home Page, especially the TITLE tag, contains your keywords and your city. If you are a Miami plumber, make sure that both the word “Miami” and the word “plumber” appears in the visible text of your homepage. Make sure that there is visible content on your homepage that includes your target keywords and every city in which you have an office. If you have multiple locations, create landing pages for each one and link each landing page to the local listings for that city. A few vendors that do a good job of this are PetFood Express (<http://petfoodexpress.com/>) and Home Depot (<https://www.homedepot.com/>). Notice how each has a “store finder” section of the website, and each local store has a local landing page on the primary website.
- **Create a Consistent NAP.** Include a consistent NAP (Name / Address / Phone Number) on your website that matches the NAP on your Yelp, Google, and other local review sites.
- **Cross-link** from your website to your Google and Yelp listings.
- Make sure that all your listings, especially Google and Yelp, **link back** directly to your website.

## Optimize Your Contact Us Page

Even if you have only one location, be sure to have an “about us” or “contact us” page on your website as an optimized page for that city and target keywords. Optimize that page for your target home city by including the city name and keywords in your TITLE

tag, plus visible content. Also, on that page, include an embedded Google map, which you can generate by searching for your company on Google, clicking up to the maps tab, and then click the share tab. Next, click on “embed map” to get the HTML code to embed a Google map on your website. Here’s a screenshot:



Finally, use the microdata / schema.org system to embed the appropriate JSON-LD schema markup on your website. You can also use the Google “Structured Data Markup Helper” at <http://jmlinks.com/46v> for this function. J.D. Flynn has also created an online tool that will guide you through creating JSON-LD data for you at <http://jmlinks.com/32q>.

## Engage in Local Link Building

As we learned in previous Chapters, Google pays a lot of attention to inbound links to your website. The more (and better) links you have to your website, the higher you tend to rank on Google. What’s true at the *national* level is also true at the *local* level.

Google is not stupid. Google is not locally unaware. Google knows all (Remember: just Google “Is Google God?”). Google knows that the local Chamber of Commerce is local to your community, that the local Animal Welfare Nonprofit is local to your community, and that the local Mommy Blogger works just down the street from you. To this end, you want to look for **local links** and get them. Nonprofits are a simple example. Do a Google search for your city plus nonprofit, and then reach out to those nonprofits with sponsorships. In exchange for a sponsorship, require a web link back

FROM the local nonprofit TO your website. For example, try the Google search site:\*.org Tulsa “link to your website” at <http://jmlinks.com/51y>. (Replace “Tulsa” with your city, or if there are too few results, replace “Tulsa” with your state as in “Oklahoma”). In just a few seconds, you can generate a link of nearby local nonprofits that will provide links to your website. Then visit each nonprofit website and find out whom you have to pay and what you have to do to “sponsor” it and get a local link.

Another example would be to join local **organizations** or **associations** and make sure that your profile (or that of your CEO or manager) includes a link back to your local listing. Just a few quick searches and you can quickly find nonprofits, associations, organizations, and other local entities that have websites that will link to your business.

## » CULTIVATE POSITIVE REVIEWS

Returning to the social media and review aspects of local, we’ll assume you’ve claimed and optimized the relevant listing services for your local business. Most often, this will be at least Google and Yelp, and in specific industries, it might include TripAdvisor, VRBO, or Airbnb. If you sell products, it might be your product listings and uploads on Amazon. Or it might be on Glassdoor.com.

At this point, you have two options:

1. Wait **passively** for positive customer reviews, and hope that the positive reviews will outpace the negative reviews (according to the official policy of Yelp, Google, etc.).
2. Be **proactive** and try to encourage your happy customers to post reviews.

Which do you think the winners in local search and social media are doing?

## Legal Disclaimer

*You are responsible for everything you do in terms of your Internet marketing. Nothing I am writing here should be construed as required or recommended advice. Legally, I am recommending that you do nothing (option #1).*

*Take responsibility for your own actions as a marketer, and act at your own risk!*

## **Soliciting Reviews**

That said, here is the reality. If you wait passively for reviews (unless you are in the a very fun industry like restaurants, coffee shops, or bars), the most likely scenarios will be a) no reviews, or b) bad reviews, or at least a preponderance of bad reviews. You, the business owner or marketer, can, however, fight back against this dynamic. Here are some strategies to solicit positive reviews about your business:

**Face to Face.** This is the most powerful way to get positive reviews. The employee who is “face to face” with the customer builds rapport with the customer. A scenario might be:

*Technician: “OK, I’ve fixed your toilet. Let’s run through it together and verify it’s in working order.*

*Client: Yes, it’s great. Thank you so much!*

*Technician: You’re welcome. Hey, if you have a moment, could you do us a HUGE FAVOR and write a review on Google or Yelp about your experience?*

*Client: Yes.*

- If the client knows how to do this, just give him or her a card with a direct link to the review site location.
- If the client does not know how to do this, give him or her a card with step-by-step instructions.

**Phone Reminders.** Either at the time of service or shortly thereafter, call the customer to see “how it went,” and if they’re happy, ask them to write a review online.

**Paper Reminders.** Either at the time of service or shortly thereafter, mail a physical postcard thanking the client for their business and asking them to write a review on Yelp, Google, etc.

**Email Reminders.** Either at the time of service or shortly thereafter, send an email thanking the client for their business and asking them to write a review online.

**Text Reminders.** Text customers shortly after service with a link to your review listing on Google, Yelp, etc. Consumers are highly responsive to texts.

The reality is that face-to-face is, by far, the strongest way to motivate customers to write reviews, phone contact the next strongest, and so on and so forth.

## Help Customers Write Reviews

Many customers may not understand how to write a review, so a step-by-step instruction sheet would be helpful. Use a URL shortener like <http://bit.ly>, or <http://tinyurl.com> to shorten the link to your local review listing page.

## Google: Generate a REVIEW US URL on Google

Google has a unique feature to help you ask customers for reviews. Here's how.

1. Go to Google and look for your company by name and city. Alternatively, log in via <https://www.google.com/business>.
2. Under "Your business on Google" click on the down arrow on the far right. Find "Ask for reviews."
3. Copy the huge URL that appears in the browser.
4. Paste it into a tool like TinyUrl.com and shorten it, for example, to: <https://tinyurl.com/reviewstamfordlinen>.
5. Email this link to "happy clients" and ask them to review you on Google.

You can write this in an email or on a printed sheet of paper. Here's an example of an email I might send to my clients:

*Greetings!*

*Thank you so much for the opportunity to serve your Internet marketing and consulting needs. As the owner of the Jason McDonald SEO Consulting Agency, I truly appreciate your business!*

*If you have a moment, I would REALLY appreciate an honest review on one of the local listing sites. Here are the instructions:*

*Google.*

- 1. Sign into your Google and/or Gmail account at **<https://www.google.com/>**.*
- 2. Go to **<https://tinyurl.com/reviewseo-jason>***
- 3. Click on the white "Write a review."*
- 4. Write your review*

*Thank you,*

*Jason McDonald*

## **TO GET POSITIVE REVIEWS, ASK HAPPY CUSTOMERS TO REVIEW YOU**

WhiteSpark, which is a leading local review tool company, offers a free tool to help you create nice-looking Web pages and handouts to encourage reviews at **<http://jmlinks.com/4t>**. In addition, a few paid services are emerging that “pre-survey” your customers. Essentially, they first ask your customer if they liked your company and its product or service. If yes, then that customer is prompted to write a review. If no, then the customer is given a longer detailed survey, and that survey is sent to you, the business owner; the customer is NOT prompted to write a review. One such service is ReviewBuzz (**<http://www.reviewbuzz.com>**). Others are GatherUp (**<https://gatherup.com/>**) and ReviewInc (**<http://www.reviewinc.com>**).

Note, however, that recently Yelp, in particular, began to crack down on these services, blocking reviews that originate via their pre-surveys. The “nerd word” for this is called “review gating.” Even Google has now clarified that they are against review gating (See <http://jmlinks.com/47w>). All of this gets you back to the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” conundrums of review marketing, and it reinforces the importance of you, as a small business owner or marketer, taking matters into your own hands and doing your utmost to ask happy campers, and only happy campers, to “do you a favor” and write you a review online. Automating this process is more likely to trigger penalties as opposed to doing it customer-by-customer, face-to-face.

### **Be Judicious. Understand “Plausible Deniability”**

Understand that according to the official policy, even a mild handout asking for an “honest review” is a violation of the terms of service of most of the review providers! Therefore, I do NOT recommend that you post these publicly on your website. Be judicious: give them out in printed or email format, and only to those happy customers who have been pre-selected by your staff.

Obviously, if a client is unhappy and you cannot fix it to make them happy: DO NOT ASK THEM FOR A REVIEW.

In fact, a common strategy is to manually use “review gating” as follows:

- **Conduct a survey** of customers after they use your service asking them a) if they are happy, b) if they would write a review, and c) if they know how. This could be done formally (an email survey on a site like SurveyMonkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>)) or informally just be pre-asking the customer face-to-face, over the phone, or via email. You can also use Jotform and “conditional logic” to set up this type of pre-survey on your website (See <http://jmlinks.com/37j>).
- **If they ARE happy**, then ask them nicely to **write a review**.
- **If they are NOT happy**, either a) make them happy, or b) do **NOT** ask them for a review.

In this way, you avoid motivating unhappy customers to review you online. Indeed, if you are in a sensitive industry (e.g., Bail Bonds, apartment rentals) in which many customers are not happy, I do not recommend you even publicize to your clients face-to-face or in the real world that you are on the review sites. If many of your customers are negative, then do not make it “easy” for them to give you a negative review!

## **Paying for Reviews**

Let’s face it. Review marketing is the “contact sport” of social media marketing. In certain industries (e.g., DUI attorneys, private detectives, breast augmentation services), many reviews are solicited if not faked and sometimes incentivized with monetary payments.

Should you pay for reviews? Generally speaking, I would not pay for reviews. (I am talking about real clients, not completely faked reviews). Some companies do incentivize by giving \$25 Starbucks or Amazon gift cards once a review is published; however, if this becomes known to Yelp or Google, you run a very great risk of being severely penalized.

*Offering monetary incentives to get reviews is a dangerous strategy, so be forewarned.*

Yelp will even mark your listing with an aggressive naughty notice if you are busted paying for reviews. First and foremost, therefore, if you choose to “go to the dark side” and offer payments, I would not publicize it! And: **I AM NOT RECOMMENDING THAT YOU DO THIS.** I am just pointing out that it is done.

Also, note that not only is “paying for reviews” likely to bring down the wrath of Yelp, you can also bring down the wrath of Yelp by offering to pay a negative reviewer to take down their review. Yelp even now explicitly forbids spiffing employees when they successfully get a review. Anytime you are offering money in exchange for a Yelp behavior, then you run that risk – so be forewarned about just how uptight Yelp is about reviews and payments! (Google and other sites have similar policies).

## **Incentivize Employees**

A better way to increase your positive review count is to offer your employees an incentive, rather than the customer, for reviews published online. Assume, for example, that you are a local pizza joint. Offer your employees a \$25.00 bonus EACH after each positive review on Yelp. Or, if you are a roofing company, give the technician a handout explaining how to write a review online, and give him a \$25.00 bonus EACH TIME a customer posts a review. In that way, you motivate your front-line employees to be customer-friendly, and when there is a positive customer experience, to politely ask the customer to write an honest review on Yelp, Google, etc.

### **Motivate your employees to ask for reviews!**

I would not put any pro-active review solicitation strategy in writing on the Internet, just as I would not call the California Highway Patrol and inform them that, in general, I go five miles faster than the posted speed limit while driving the highways and byways of the Golden State.

*Let sleeping dogs lie.*

But just as going 65 mph in a 60 mph zone is unlikely to cause a police action, polite nudges to encourage real reviews from real customers are unlikely to be a big problem. If you do it, just keep it private, and do so at your own risk.

### **Don't Overthink It. Just Ask for Reviews from Real Customers**

In my experience, if most businesses would simply *ask* a few clients for reviews, they would get them. Yes, you'll ask ten clients to get one review. But you'll get that one review. The real problem is to motivate employees to ask and ask and ask and ask to get that one review to go live on Yelp, Google, or other review sites.

Recognize, understand, and accept that you will ask ten people to get just one review. That's just how it is: customers are self-centered and lazy (but we love them).

Getting positive reviews is hard work. It's not done in a day. Slow and steady will win the race. Just create a culture at your business of great customer service and an awareness of that "special moment" when a customer is happy to ask for a positive, honest review.

## **JUST ASK. IT'S SO SIMPLE. JUST ASK.**

Do anything and everything honestly and ethically possible to encourage your best customers to "spread the word" by writing reviews about your business online. After just a few positive reviews, you will be amazed at what they do for your business.

### **Responding to Negative Reviews**

Negative reviews will happen. As the business owner, you may feel as if someone walked up to your newborn baby sleeping calmly in her stroller and said to you:

*Your baby is ugly. Your baby stinks. I hate your baby. I had a bad experience with your baby, and I am going to tell the world how much the baby that you are working for blood, sweat, and tears is terrible.*

Here's an example:



You're human. You're close to your business. It is like your baby. Your first reaction will be **ANGER**.

Resist the temptation to respond in kind. Do not go online and argue with the negative consumer. Do not insult them. Do not use unprofessional language. *When you wrestle with a pig, the pig gets dirty, and the pig likes it.*

Instead:

- **Calm down.** Wait at least 24 hours before doing anything. Sleep on it.
- **Have someone else deal with negative reviews:** an outside consultant or employee who is not emotionally involved. Let a calm head prevail, and it probably will not be the head of the business owner.
- **Try to fix the problem.** If at all possible, reason with the person (you can usually contact them via Yelp, Google, etc.), and see if you can fix the problem. In some cases, you can, and then you can politely ask them to change the review.
- **Respond.** State your side of the situation in a positive, professional manner while acknowledging the right of the reviewer to her own opinion.

Remember: every business will get a few negative reviews, but if your business has more than the average... you may have a “business” problem and not a “review” problem.

### **Don’t shoot the (review) messenger.**

#### **Do Not Validate the Bad Review**

Please note that if you have a negative review on a site like Yelp, Google, Amazon, etc., and the reviewer has a **weak profile** (e.g., *this is their first review, few friends, etc.*), if you respond to it, you are *validating* that review and making it *more likely* to appear high in your profile. Generally speaking; therefore, I recommend waiting at least a month before responding to a negative review by someone with a weak profile. There is a strong chance it will be filtered out as fake (especially on Yelp). But if, after a month, it is still there, then consider a response.

#### **Responding to Reviews**

To **respond to a negative review**, do as follows. First and foremost, take the high ground. You can log into your business account / profile and respond to negative reviews. This is one of the benefits of claiming your business profile. But be positive and professional. Acknowledge their right to their opinion, but be firm as to your right to state your opinion as well. Second, state your side of the situation but realize you are NOT talking to the unhappy customer. You are talking to the person reading your reviews and deciding whether to reach out to you for a possible business engagement. Explain your side of the story. Often negative reviews come from nasty, unhappy people (which you can politely point out by asking the reader to click on the reviewer’s name and see all their other negative reviews to realize that this is just a negative person). Or, the person wasn’t a good fit for your business (so explain why). Or the person is plain crazy. For example, I have had plastic surgeons condemned on Yelp because their waiting room was too hot, or other clients condemned because they didn’t respond to an unsolicited email. Finally, if the review is fake (i.e., by a competitor) or obscene, or racist, you can complain to Yelp, Google, etc., and in some cases, they will remove the reviews. (To do this, log in to a personal account on Yelp and right-click on the offensive review. You can then flag it and complain).

To read Yelp’s official guide to responding to reviews, visit <http://jmlinks.com/5e>. To read Google’s, visit <http://jmlinks.com/5f>. To read TripAdvisor’s, visit <http://jmlinks.com/5g>. For whatever review site that matters to your business, you can usually search their help files for advice on how to respond to reviews. However, remember that the official policies are often very naive about how the game is truly played.

Finally, if a review of your business on Google is truly malicious and incorrect, there is a “Business Redressal Complaint Form” at <http://jmlinks.com/56v>. You can even use this form to report the “fake” reviews of a competitor, as it is another version of Google’s “spy vs. spy” approach to having all of us do their work by snitching on each other. Use it in this way, at your own risk.

## SWAMP NEGATIVE REVIEWS WITH POSITIVE REVIEWS

A better strategy is to ignore the bad reviews and focus on soliciting positive reviews to “swamp” the negative reviews in an ocean of positivity. Again, in no way, shape or form am I advising you to be dishonest or solicit fake reviews. I am simply advising you to ask happy customers to just take a few minutes and tell their happy stories. If you proactively solicit positive, real reviews, you can drown out or swamp the negative reviews with a preponderance of positive reviews. In short, getting real positive reviews is the best way to respond to negative reviews.

*You don’t ask; you don’t get.*

For your fourth **TO-DO**, download the **Review Solicitation Worksheet**. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “Reviews Solicitation Worksheet.” You’ll create a strategy to encourage positive reviews about your company.

## » MONITOR AND IMPROVE YOUR ONLINE REPUTATION

**Reputation management** is a new buzzword about protecting one's online reputation, whether for an individual or a business. To understand reputation management, first back up and consider the sales funnel, often explained as *AIDA: Awareness, Interest, Desire, and Action*. Prospective customers go through distinct phases as they consider solutions for their problems, needs, or desires:

**Awareness.** An **awareness** of the problem and the beginning of Internet searches and social media outreach to friends, family, and colleagues about the problem, need, or desire and possible solutions. In this phase, searches are often “educational” in nature as in “how to cater a wedding” or “wedding ideas.”

**Interest.** As a customer becomes aware of available market solutions, they develop an **interest** in vendor offerings and even may make a shortlist. At this stage, and the next, they move closer to an “action,” i.e., a purchase or engagement with a vendor solution. Searches at this point become “best wedding caterers” or “Boston catering companies,” etc.

**Desire.** Interest shifts towards **desire**, and the customer begins to narrow down his or her shortlist. At this point, searches become *reputational* in nature. They may search a business name PLUS words like *reviews* or *complaints*. If your business were named Gina's Italian Kitchen, for example, they might search Google for “Gina's Italian Kitchen Reviews” or “Complaints against Gina's Italian Kitchen,” or “Gina's Italian Kitchen Wedding Catering Reviews.” **Reviews** is the operative word; if he or she finds *positive* reviews, that confirms your business is a good choice, whereas if he or she finds *negative* reviews, they may take you out of the consideration set entirely.

**Action.** A choice is made to purchase the service or engage with your business. Upon completion, the customer may decide to leave her own review about your business for others.

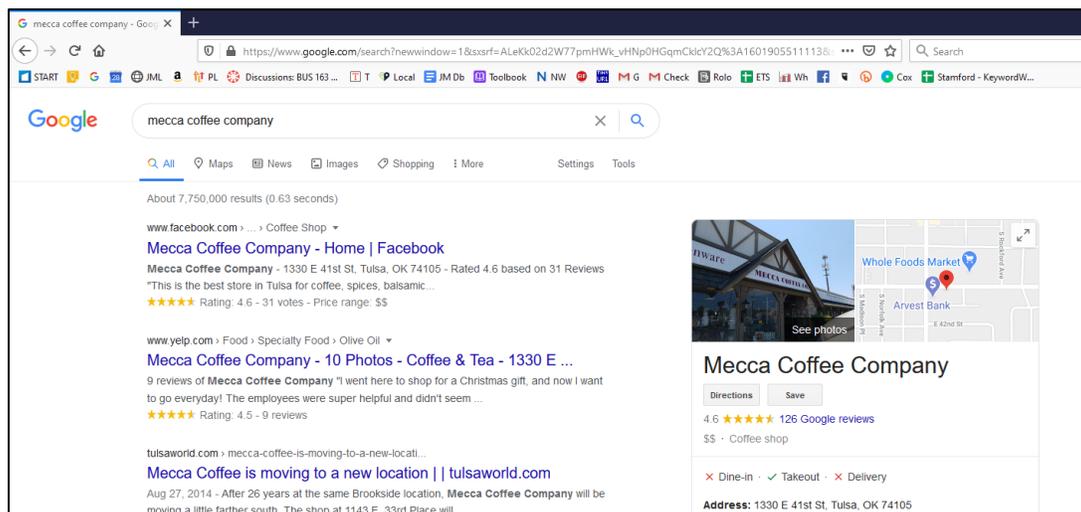
*Reputation management*, in short, is monitoring and protecting your online **branded** and **reputational** searches. To be frank, it is also about attempting to upgrade positive reviews and positive brand mentions so that your online brand image shines.

To understand the search patterns, you can use the example of my company, The JM Internet Group. For example –

a “branded” search is: “JM Internet Group”

a “reputational” search is “JM Internet Group Reviews”

Review sites such as Yelp, CitySearch, Google, etc., as well as ones specific to your industry, can have an extremely positive – or extremely negative – impact on your online reputation. Indeed, branded searches on Google (searches for your company name or your company name plus ‘reviews’) often return Google profiles and reviews directly on the right side of the page. For example, here’s a screenshot of the search “Mecca Coffee Company” on Google:



You can try the search at <http://jmlinks.com/32n>. Notice the primacy of reviews and the highlighted Google listing information, plus review count on the far right. Scroll

down the page and notice how Google identifies reviews on sites like Facebook, Yelp, and even Beeradvocate. Someone interested in going to the Mecca Coffee Company in Tulsa is likely to search for the company by name or perhaps for “Mecca Coffee Company Reviews.” This is even more true for high-value searches like probate attorneys, roofing companies, or kitchen remodeling contractors.

## **GOOGLE YOUR COMPANY NAME PLUS REVIEWS AND MONITOR YOUR ONLINE REPUTATION**

In addition to identifying, claiming, and optimizing your business listings on relevant review sites, you should also monitor your business on these sites. Usually, the act of claiming your listing in and of itself will generate an email anytime someone reviews your company. Paid services such as ReviewPush (<https://www.reviewpush.com/>), Free Review Monitoring (<https://freereviewmonitoring.com/>), and ReviewTrackers (<http://www.reviewtrackers.com/>) are sophisticated alert systems so that you always know whenever a new review is published about your business.

The reality is that you need to monitor your business reputation at least monthly, if not even more frequently. This means:

1. Doing Google searches for your company name as well as your company name plus “reviews;” and
2. Identifying the key customer review sites that matter for your business, such as Google, Yelp, YP.com, Avvo, etc. (this will vary by industry); and
3. Monitoring your review count, average star score, and whether you are getting more positive reviews each week or month;
4. Responding to negative reviews as needed; and, of course –
5. Proactively soliciting positive reviews on the key review sites to bolster your reputation.

For your fifth **TO-DO**, at a minimum, set up a monthly checkup of your listings on the major review sites you have identified. Note in a spreadsheet how many reviews you

have, how many are 5, 4, 3, 2, or 1 stars. If you have a budget, consider using a paid monitoring service.

## » MEASURE YOUR RESULTS

Let's sum up the bottom line. Reviews impact your business in two important ways:

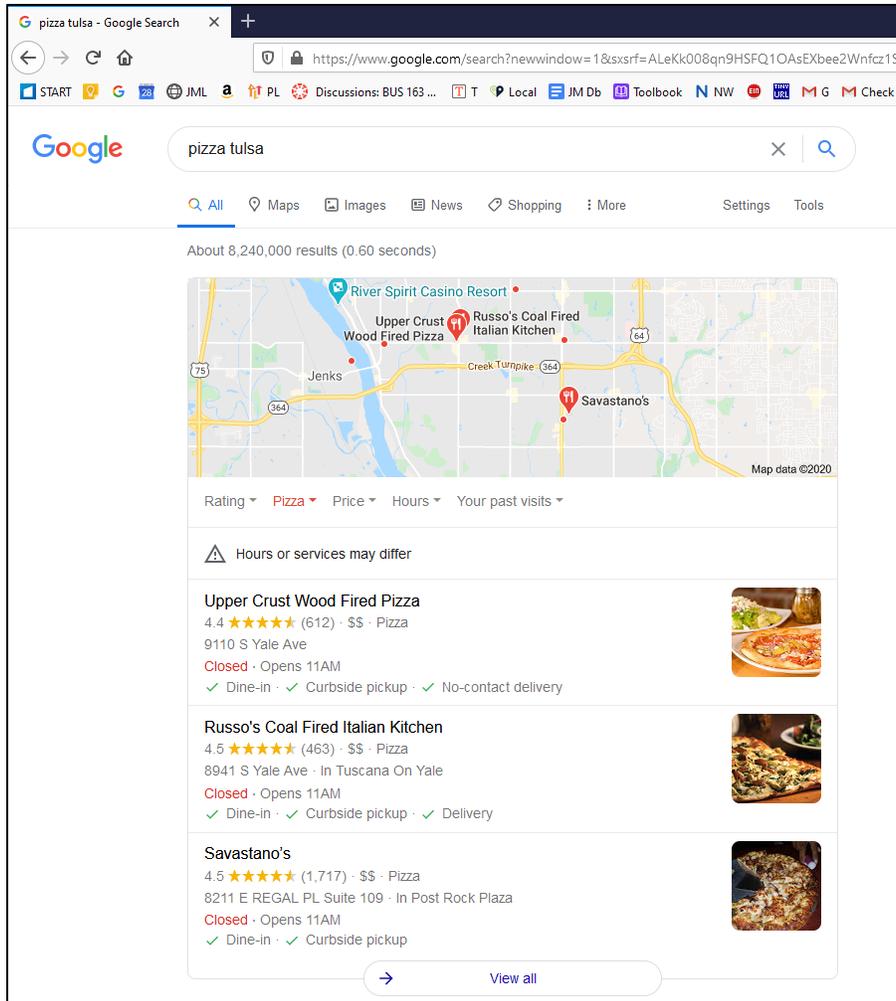
- as a positive (or negative) “trust indicator” that you are a trustworthy business partner; and
- as a signal to search engines and review sites that you should rank high on searches for relevant keywords.

## MONITOR YOUR REVIEWS

Measurement of reviews, therefore, is focused on these two variables. On your keyword worksheet, I recommend that you create a tab called “local.” Then every month, create a line item (for example, December 2023), and note down for your business:

The review site, number of reviews you have, and cumulative star rating.

Secondly, try searches for your strategic keywords on Yelp, Google, and/or on other relevant review sites (e.g., Airbnb, TripAdvisor, etc.), create a line item for each month, and indicate your position on those searches. For example, Russo's Coal-Fired Italian Kitchen was measured as No. 2 for the Google Search “pizza Tulsa” as seen in this screenshot:



This would be recorded as Russo's ranking #2 in the Google local pack and having 463 reviews with a 4.5 star score. In other words, the restaurant is in good shape on both review sites. If it had dipped to a lower position, for instance, then a to-do would be to encourage more reviews on Google. Similar checks would be performed on key restaurant review sites like Yelp or TripAdvisor.

The two major aspects of monitoring your reviews, therefore, are 1) your review count on each review site and 2) your position on keyword searches on those sites. To the extent possible, you can then accelerate your efforts for a lagging site and relax a bit for a site for which you rank well and have positive reviews. (Note to monitor your rank, you can use the Fat Rank plugin for Chrome to monitor your rank on Google searches at <http://jmlinks.com/25w> or graduate to a paid rank measurement service such as

AHREFS.com, MOZ.com, or BrightLocal.com. A good free tool to vary your location on Google search can be found at <http://jmlinks.com/54v>.)

## »»» CHECKLIST: REVIEW ACTION ITEMS

Test your knowledge of the Review Revolution! Take the *Review marketing quiz* at <http://jmlinks.com/qzrv>. Next, here are your review **Action Items**:

- Research** whether your customers (and competitors) utilize reviews. Which sites seem to matter for reviews, and why?
  - Identify a few *customer profiles* that match your *buyer personas*, and determine how active they are as reviewers.
  - Identify **companies** or **products** to “reverse engineer.” Who is doing a good job on various review sites both in terms of their search rank and their review volume and aggregate star ratings? Why? How?
- Set up or claim **business listings** (e.g., claim your Google My Business account, Yelp account, Airbnb listings, etc.). Be sure to write down the passwords and keep them safe!
- Optimize** your **business listings** by writing keyword-heavy copy into the business or product description and uploading relevant photos.
- SEO** your website for local search by including city names and keywords on your homepage, plus launch city-specific landing pages, especially for those cities in which you have a physical location. Be sure to include your physical address and phone number so that it’s easy for Google to see where you are located in the physical world. Include JSON-LD markup language / Schema markup language using the Google Webmaster’s Structured Data Mark up Helper at <http://jmlinks.com/46x>.
- Engage in Local Link-building.** Don’t forget that, as part of your link-building strategy, you should look for **local link opportunities**. Join local

associations, organizations, etc, and work with local nonprofits and business colleagues to get local links to your website.

- ❑ **Optimize your NAP consistency** by having a consistent name, address, and phone on your website and on all relevant listing sites. Consider using a service like Moz Local, Yext, or Whitespark to claim and optimize your secondary listings.

- ❑ Create a **review solicitation strategy** that you are comfortable with. This may be as simple as simply requiring employees to “ask” for a review after each job, or as complex as a pre-survey that has a review follow-up.

  - ❑ Pay attention to your company’s branded searches on Google and whether review sites are showing up as part of a **reputation management** strategy.

  - ❑ **Respond to negative reviews**, but be polite and take the high ground.

- ❑ Measure your **KPIs** (Key Performance Indicators), such as total reviews and aggregate star ratings each month.

Check out the **free tools!** Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Local SEO / SMM* for my favorite free tools on local and review marketing. Just visit <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>.

## »» **DELIVERABLE: LOCAL SEO MARKETING PLAN**

Now that we’ve come to the end of our Chapter on local reviews, your **DELIVERABLE** has arrived. For your final **TO-DO**, download the **Yelp / Local Marketing Plan Worksheet**. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “Yelp / Local Review Marketing Worksheet.” By filling out this plan, you and your team will establish a vision of what you want to achieve via local reviews.





# 6.1

## METRICS

**Google Analytics** is the best free Web metrics tool available today. It is, however, only a tool. It doesn't tell you what to measure nor what to do with the information you acquire. Before you even start with Analytics, your first step is to think through *what* you want to measure and *why* you want to measure it. Common metrics are your *rank* on Google for target keyword queries, *traffic sources* or how people find your website, your top *landing pages*, your *bounce rate*, and whether landings on your website convert into *goals*, such as registrations or sales. Second, after you've identified what you want to measure, you need to turn to not just Google Analytics but other metrics tools and understand how to use them. Third, there are even more advanced techniques that can "slice and dice" your data so that you truly know what's going on with your website. Finally, there's no point in getting all this data unless you do something with it, so you need to take the knowledge gained from Analytics and turn it into actionable to-dos.

**Let's get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Define What to Measure
- » Measure Your SERP Rank
- » Measure Your Domain Authority and Social Metrics
- » Use Google Search Console (Webmaster Tools)
- » Set up Both UA and GA4
- » Use Google Analytics Basic Features
- » Use Advanced Features in Google Analytics
- »» Checklist: Metrics Action Items

## » DEFINE WHAT TO MEASURE

Metrics, especially as seen through the prism of Google Analytics, can seem overwhelming. Most marketers and small business owners want to measure whether they are ranking on Google, whether they're getting traffic, and whether that traffic is converting (or not) into sales or sales leads as indicated by feedback forms. In terms of more specific items, here is a breakdown of things you should commonly measure or record every month on the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month:

- 1. Your Rank on Google Searches.** SEO starts with whether your website is in position 1, 2, or 3 on Google or at least page one. Using your keywords as identified on your keyword worksheet, you want to measure your rank on Google and its improvement over time. By knowing which keywords you rank well for, and which you rank poorly for, you'll know where you need to concentrate your efforts.
- 2. Your Domain Authority and Links.** Off Page SEO is all about links, so you want to use a tool like MOZ.com or AHREFS.com and measure the domain authority of your website, and the number of inbound links. With your link-building efforts, this should improve over time.
- 3. Social Media & Reviews.** Social media is increasingly important for Off Page SEO, so you want to measure your “followers” on Twitter, your “likes” on Facebook, and your “followers” on LinkedIn for your company page. In addition, if local matters to you, you want to keep track of your **review count** on at least Google and Yelp. Through your promotion efforts, you want to see an increase in **followers** and **reviews** over time.
- 4. Traffic Sources.** Turning to Google Search Console and Google Analytics, you want to measure your “traffic sources” to learn how people *find* your website, especially your best-performing keywords and referrer websites.
- 5. User Behavior.** Once they land on your website, do they convert to a sale or sales lead, or do they just browse around and leave? Learn what people *do* once they land on your website, especially marketing goals such as registrations or

completed sales. Understand *successes* and *failures* and investigate ways to improve your conversion rate.

For your first **TO-DO**, call a marketing meeting, sit down with a blank piece of paper or a Word / Google doc, and brainstorm what metrics are most important to you as a marketer. How do people find you? What do they do once they land on your website? Many marketers also speak of **KPIs (Key Performance Indicators)**, which can be something as specific as inbound calls from customers or something as conceptual as your brand equity. In terms of SEO, what background metrics, such as rank on Google and reviews on Google or Yelp, turbocharge your success on Google? Identify these and other KPIs that can be translated into something concrete to measure.

It's also important to keep the general "flow" of the "sales ladder" or "sales funnel" in mind:

*Awareness / need > keyword search query > your website ranking on Google > click from Google > landing on your website > user behavior > sales lead or sale*

Your KPIs should take measurements at any point along this process, with an eye to what can go "right" or what can go "wrong" at any step. For example, you might not rank on Google at all. Or you might rank but not get the click because your **TITLE** and **META DESCRIPTION** are not enticing. Or you might get the click, but not the sale or conversion, because your landing page experience isn't very compelling, etc.

## » **MEASURE YOUR SERP RANK**

Your **SERP rank** (Search Engine Results Page) measures your website's position versus a target search query. Once you know your keywords, then the first KPI is whether you rank or not for various related search queries on Google. (You may read on the blogosphere that rank doesn't matter, but that's just silly. Measuring rank is indeed getting harder to measure because of localization and personalization, but this doesn't

mean you shouldn't pay attention to your rank on Google vis-à-vis your keyword targets! *No rank, no click, no click, no sale.*)

Let's review some of the ways to measure where your website ranks on Google vis-à-vis your target keywords.

## **#1 Measure Your Rank Manually**

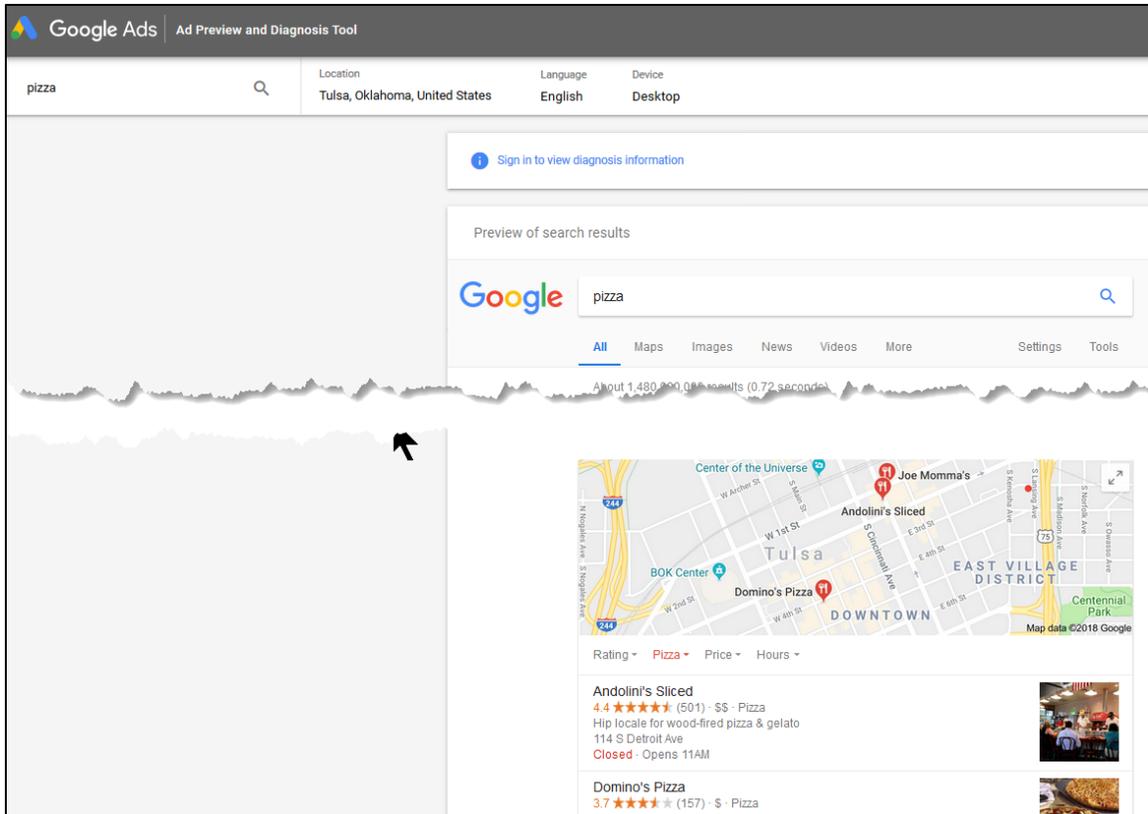
Simply go to Google and use "incognito" mode in your browser. In Chrome, that's hidden in the top right under the "three dots." You can also log in to your Google account (top right when you are on Google.com) under your picture. Alternatively, you can go to Google.com (<https://www.google.com/>) and make sure you are "signed in." Then, go to <https://www.google.com/preferences> and find "Personal results." Click "Manage" and then turn off "Personal Results."

Next, while browsing in "incognito mode" or with "personal results" off, do your searches by entering your various keyword phrases into Google. Then find your domain on the Google results page and count your position from the top, being careful to only count the organic results (i.e., ignoring ads and ignoring the "local pack"). Record them as 1,2,3, etc., up to 10 on an Excel spreadsheet or on a tab on your keyword worksheet.

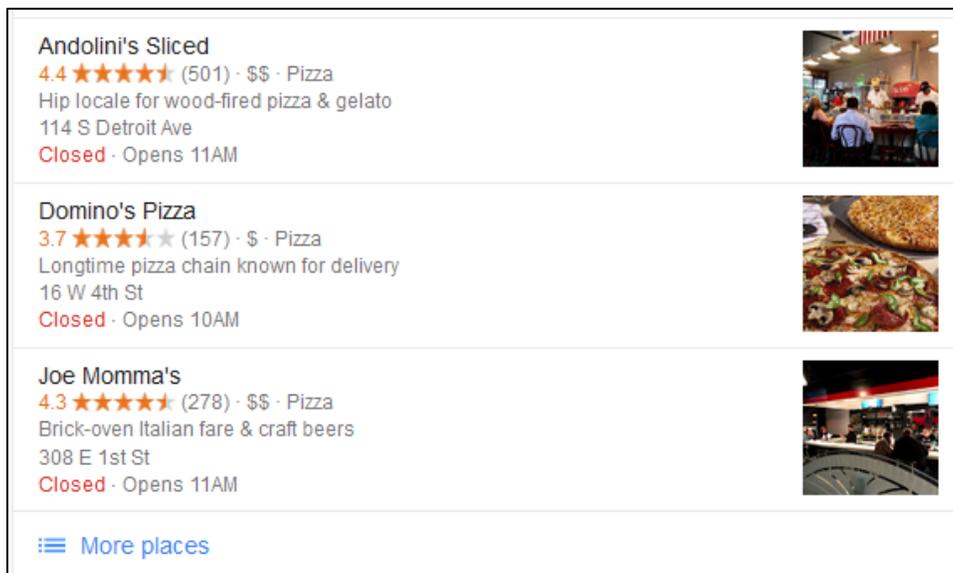
## **#1b Measure Your Rank Manually for Local Search Queries**

As we discussed in the previous Chapter, Google varies the results for certain "local" searches based on your user location. For example, a searcher in Tulsa, Oklahoma, sees different search results for "Pizza" than a searcher in Portland, Maine. You can check your localized search results via the Google Ads Preview Tool. To access it, log in to your Google Ads account, then click on "Tools" at the top right and then "Ad Preview" on the left menu. Or use the free version at <http://jmlinks.com/54g>.

Here's a screenshot of the AdWords Preview tool for "pizza" with the location set to Tulsa, OK:

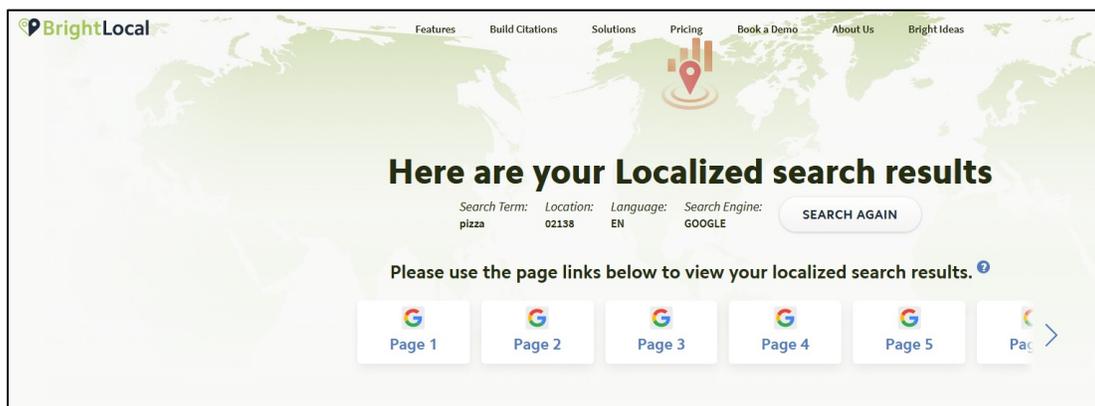


And here's a screenshot of the "local snack pack:"



Andolini’s would thus be position “A,” Domino’s position “B,” and Joe Momma’s position “C.” Note that it is industry practice to record positions in the Local Pack as “A, B, C,” not “1, 2, 3” to distinguish them from your rank in the organic results.

If you don’t have access to the Google Ads preview tool, use the BrightLocal location tool at <http://jmlinks.com/54v>. Be sure to be in “incognito” mode so that your past behavior doesn’t influence your Google rank. Then input a city or zip code in the location field, enter a keyword, and press enter. Here’s a screenshot showing a search for “pizza” in zip code 02138 (Cambridge, Massachusetts).



Regardless of the method used, record your rank on Google for location searches in the “local pack” as A, B, or C, or if there are variations in organic, then track those as well location by location.

At any rate, you can see that you need to manually:

- Check your rank on Google vs. your target keywords in the organic positions; and, if necessary,
- Check your rank on Google in the “local pack” vs. your target keyword city-by-city; and, if necessary,

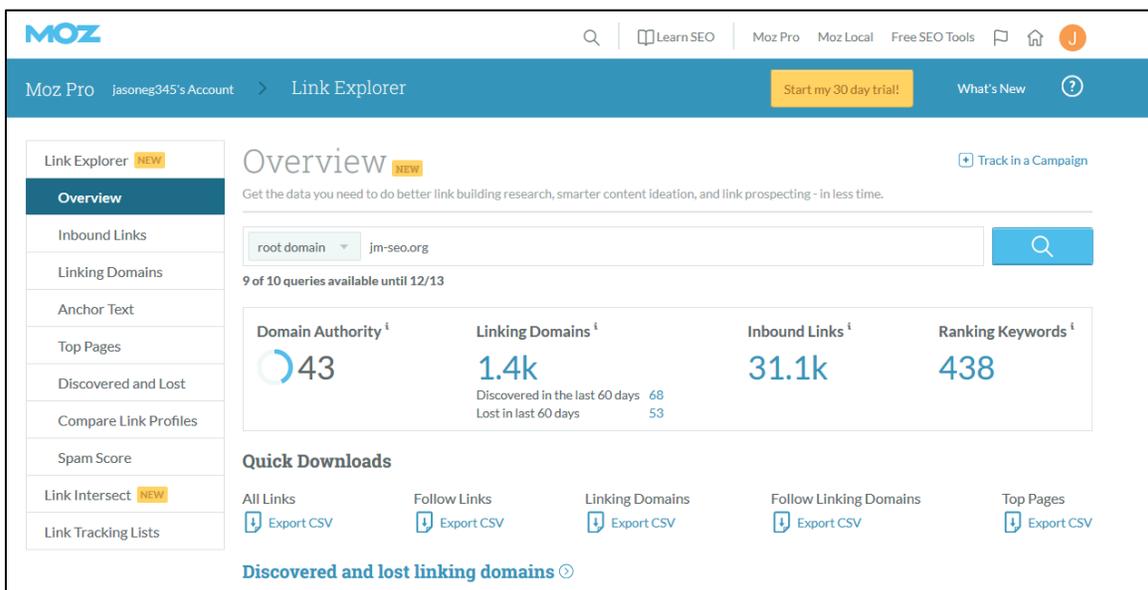
- Check / recheck your rank on Google in organic positions if those also vary by city in addition to the “local pack.”

As it’s time-consuming to measure your rank manually, I recommend using a paid tool such as WhiteSpark., MOZ, or SEMRush, which will automatically record your rank by keyword, ignore personalization, and allow for localization city-by-city. Time is money, so I recommend a paid tool for this measurement.

## » MEASURE YOUR DOMAIN AUTHORITY AND SOCIAL METRICS

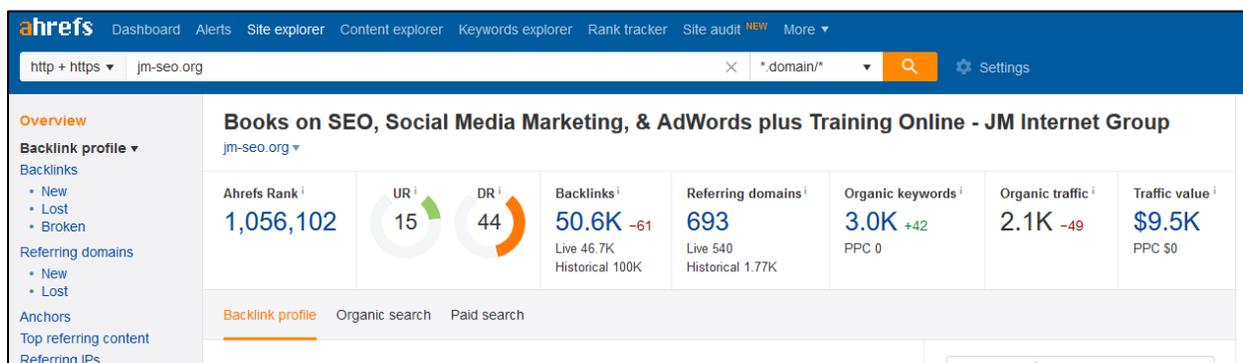
Your **PageRank** or **Domain Authority** is a measurement of your authority on the Web. It is not really publicly released, so use third-party tools such as MOZ.com or AHREFS.com that will give you your **domain authority**. As we learned in link building, think of your **Web Authority** as a measurement of how important your site is on the Web.

I recommend you measure your **domain authority** as a surrogate for Google PageRank on a monthly basis. Go to MOZ Link Explorer at <http://jmlinks.com/7y>, input your website homepage URL, and note the two metrics at the top of the page: domain authority and linking domains. Record each of these on your keyword worksheet each month. Here’s a screenshot for jm-seo.org:



**Domain authority** is a surrogate for Google PageRank or a metric that measures how important Google thinks your website is. A site like *nytimes.com* might be 100, whereas *jm-seo.org* is a 43, and a tiny, unimportant site might be a 7. What's important is your domain authority relative to competitors and whether this improves over time. **Linking domains** is the number of websites that link to you; again, you want this to grow over time. You can see here it's a 1.4 thousand, meaning 1400 websites link to the domain. **Total links** at 31.1k indicates the total number of links to the site. The **Spam score** (located on the far left column) is an attempt, after Google's Penguin update, to measure whether your site is on the "naughty list" or not.

Another good site to use for this purpose is AHREFS.com. Here's a screenshot from their tool:



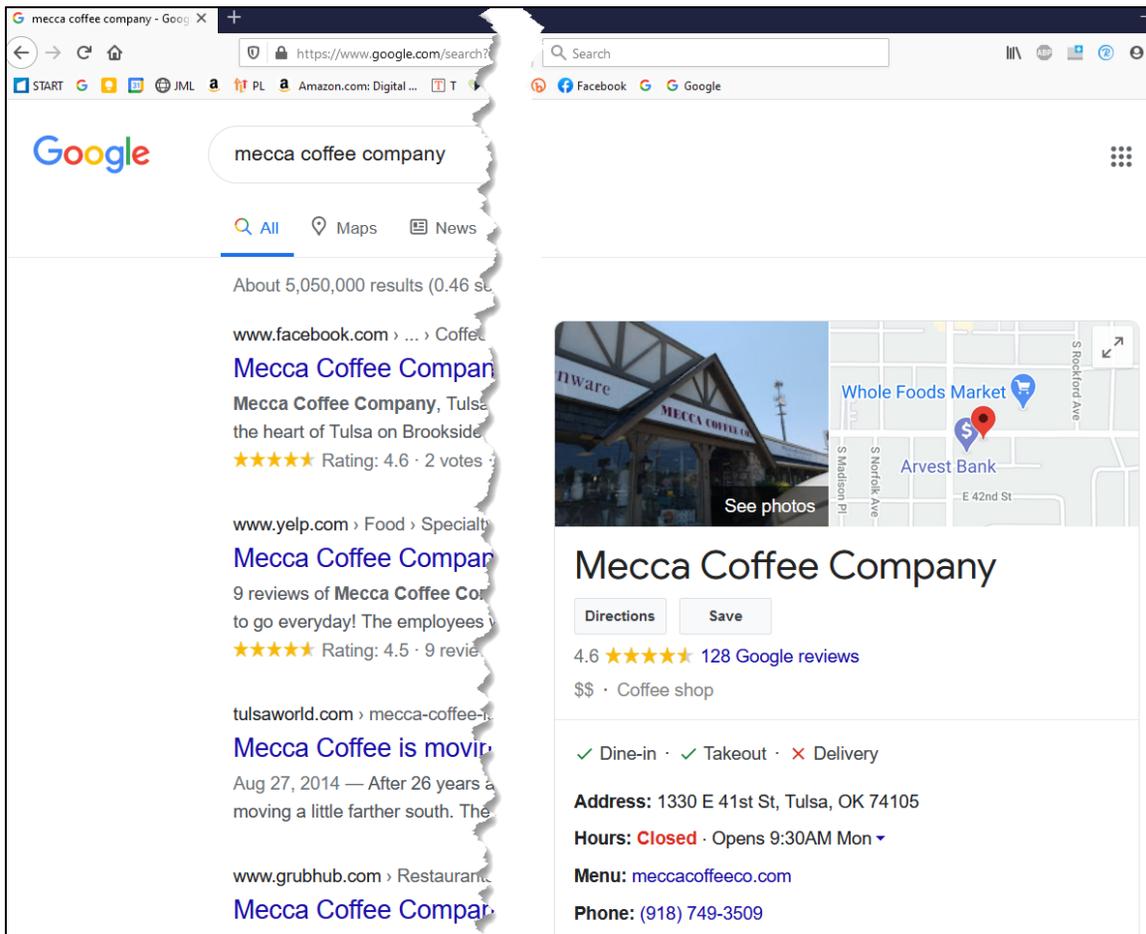
The nomenclature is a bit different, but both tools essentially give you a score for your domain, a number of other domains linking to you, and a raw number of inbound links.

Choose a tool you like, be consistent, and record at least your domain authority and linking root domains each month. This gives you an indication as to whether your link-building is working or not.

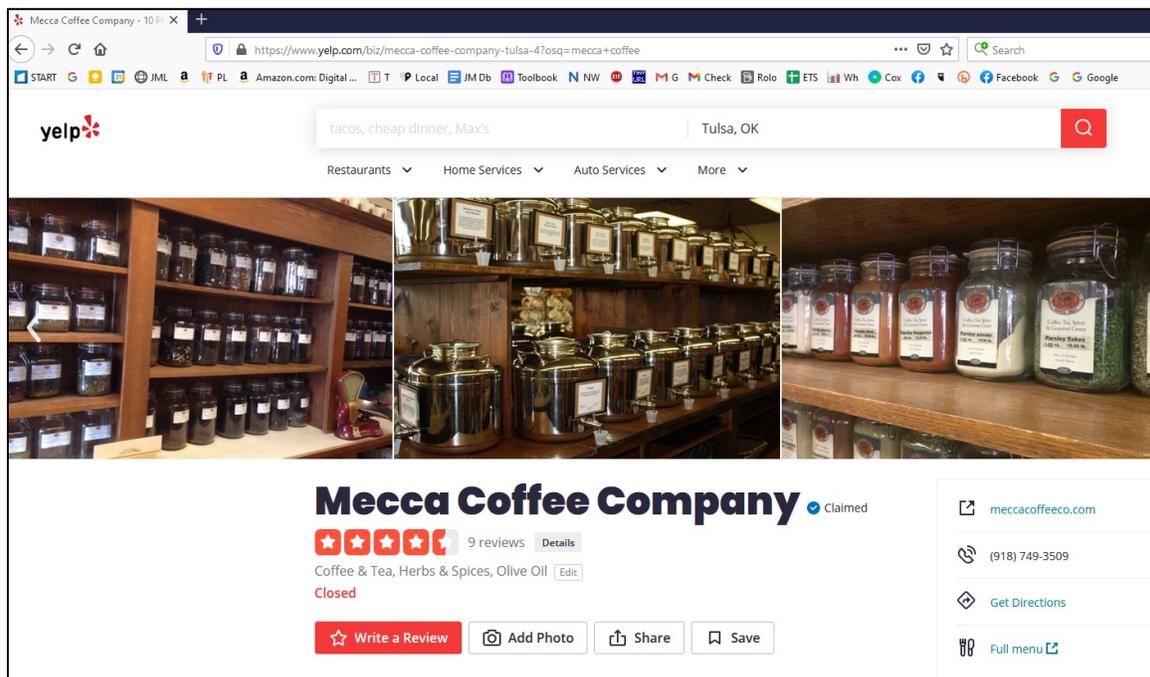
## Social Media Metrics

Next, measure your followers on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc., your page views, and your review count on Yelp and Google. You want these all to move in a positive direction over time. Increasingly, SEO is “going social,” so it’s a good time to be aware of how your social authority is improving over time.

Record your follower count on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc., each month by logging into each account and recording the number. That’s easy enough. To track your review count as a local business on Google, simply Google your company name and record the review number. Here is a screenshot of Tulsa’s Mecca Coffee Company showing 128 reviews on Google:



Yelp is the No. 2 review site, so I also recommend tracking your Yelp reviews as those feed Yelp as well as Bing. Just go to <https://www.yelp.com> and search for your company by name and city. Here's a screenshot for Mecca Coffee Company showing nine reviews on Yelp:



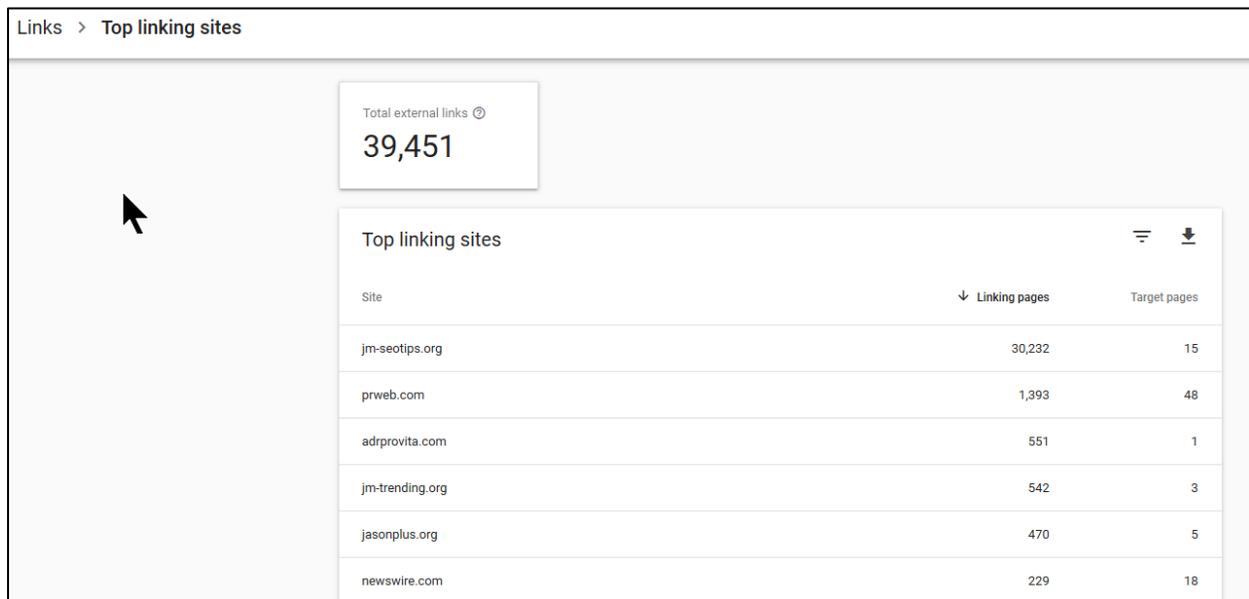
You'd also want to track the third most important review site, **Facebook**. Mecca Coffee has 82 reviews on Facebook with a 4.6 star score. You can see it at <http://jmlinks.com/47u>.

If you are a local business, **reviews** are incredibly important. So on your keyword worksheet, create a tab called “social” and add in your social media sites such as Google or Yelp that have customer reviews. Chart the number and the average star score each month. Mecca Coffee would thus record 128 Google reviews with a 4.5 star average, 9 Yelp reviews with a 4.5 star average, and 82 reviews on Facebook with a 4.6 star average. Do this each month.

## » USE GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE (WEBMASTER TOOLS)

I'll assume you've claimed your **Google Search Console** account (<https://search.google.com/search-console>) as well as the corresponding **Webmaster Tools** account on Bing. These give you some unique items that are not available in Google Analytics. First and foremost, Google Search Console will give you a rough idea of your **inbound keyword queries**. On the left-hand menu, click *Performance*. Next, drill into "search results," where Google will give you a rough idea of those search terms for which you performed well. On the far right, you can click the arrow to download your search terms data. You can also see data for pages, countries, and devices. Take this data with a grain of salt, as it's not clear that it's entirely accurate, but it gives you some data on the keywords people are entering, for which you rank on Google and the clicks from Google to your website.

Next, again on the far left, click on **Links**. Google will give you a dashboard of your top linked pages and top linking sites. Click on *Top Linking Sites > More* to see a complete output of all the sites linking to you. Here's a screenshot:



The screenshot displays the 'Links > Top linking sites' dashboard in Google Search Console. At the top, it shows 'Total external links' as 39,451. Below this is a table titled 'Top linking sites' with columns for 'Site', 'Linking pages', and 'Target pages'. The table lists several sites with their respective linking page counts and target page counts.

Site	Linking pages	Target pages
jm-seotips.org	30,232	15
prweb.com	1,393	48
adrprovita.com	551	1
jm-trending.org	542	3
jasonplus.org	470	5
newswire.com	229	18

Record that raw number each month; in this example, it's 39,451. Over time you should see this number grow as you build more and more links to your website.

You can also link Google Search Console into Google Analytics, so you can see this data in one place. For information on how to link them, visit <http://jmlinks.com/15b>.

As for Bing Webmaster Tools, similar data is available.

## » SET UP BOTH UA AND GA4

Google Analytics is transitioning to a new type of Analytics called “GA4.” The “traditional” form, called “UA” for “Universal Analytics,” is set to stop working in July 2023. At the time of this writing, however, I think there is a good chance that the transition will be delayed.

**Let me be blunt.** *GA4 sucks. It really, really sucks.* If Google were not a monopoly, there is no way in hell that they could, or would, roll out this flaming hot pile of dog doo-doo on their customers.

In the meantime, however, I would recommend that we “prepare for the worst” and “hope for the best,” meaning install GA4 and begin to learn how to use it but continue to use the much easier and more mature UA platform until Google hopefully improves GA4 into something that is actually usable.

If you already have UA running, you can go into your Google Analytics UA account. Then click on the “gear” icon at the bottom left, and then under “Create Property,” click on “GA4 Set up Assistant.” This will guide you through setup and how to install the new GA4 code on your website.

If you are new to Google Analytics, the best way to install Google Analytics is via Google Tag Manager (<https://tagmanager.google.com/>). Follow the prompts there to create a Tag Manager account, and then follow the prompts to create “tags” for both Google Analytics UA and GA4. You’ll need to simultaneously create UA and GA4 accounts in analytics and then copy/paste the relevant account numbers into your tag manager “tags.” Finally, if you are using WordPress, use a Plugin such as GTM4WP (<http://jmlinks.com/59m>) and attach Tag Manager to your WordPress. If you are using WIX, Squarespace, or some other CMS, reach out to technical support as to how to install Google Tag Manager on your platform.

Thus, the steps are:

1. If you *already* have Google Analytics UA running, create a parallel GA4 account. Install the GA4 code either directly to your website, use a WordPress plugin, or via Google Tag Manager and a WordPress Plug in.
2. If you are *new*, create both a UA and GA4 account in Google Analytics, create a Google Tag Manager account, use the appropriate account numbers for both UA and GA4, and insert Google Tag Manager into your website via a Plugin.

The big picture here is:

Google Tag Manager > Tags for both UA and GA4 > Installation to your website either directly or via a plugin.

At the end of this process, you should see live data in both UA and GA4 via Google Analytics. Google has a robust help file at <http://jmlinks.com/59k>. If you don't have a resident computer nerd who can help you, I recommend a site like Fiverr (<https://www.fiverr.com/>), where you can search for “Google Analytics” help.

I'll assume, at this point, you have both UA and GA4 running. Most of my examples that follow will be to UA, as that remains the dominant platform until at least July 2023. During the book's summer update, I will update if/when Google forces the transition. You can learn more about how to use GA4 at Skillshop (<https://skillshop.exceedlms.com/>) and via the help file at <https://support.google.com/analytics/answer/10089681>.

## » USE GOOGLE ANALYTICS BASIC FEATURES

Once you have installed the Google Analytics code on your site and allowed enough time to elapse for data to accumulate, it's time for some basic Analytics. Log in to Analytics, and scroll down the left-hand menu.

Turning to “Classic” Google Analytics, here’s a run-down of the left menu:

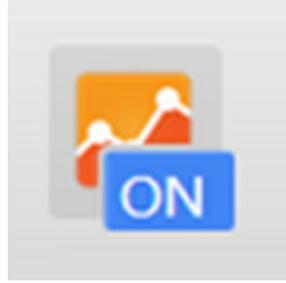
- Click on **Audience** to see basic data about how many visitors are coming to your website daily, where they are coming from, and basic traffic sources such as search engines vs. referring sites.
  - Click on **Geo** to see where your website visitors come from by country, state, and even city.
  - Click on **Technology** to see browsers that they use (e.g., Chrome, Firefox, Edge, Safari).
  - Click on **Mobile** to see your web traffic: desktop vs. tablet vs. phones, and even phone types.
  - Click on **Users Flow** for a nice, pictorial map of how people “flow” through your website.
- Click on **Acquisition** and browse “referring” sites, such as blogs, portals, news releases, etc., that are sending users from their website to yours via clicks.
  - Click on **All Traffic > Channels** to see how people get to your website, by *Direct* (URLs and bookmarks), *Organic Search* (Search Engines), *Referral* (links from other sites), and *Social* (social media sites like Facebook or Twitter).
  - Click on **Source / Medium** and **Referrals** for another view of the above data with an easy-to-read breakdown by name.
  - Click on **Google Ads** if you are running advertisements on Google; here, you can get data down to the keyword level.
  - Click on **Search Console, Queries** to see which keywords and key phrases are performing well for you in generating incoming web traffic. (Link your Google Analytics to your Google Search Console for this feature).
  - Click on **Social** for detail on social media networks; click on Users Flow here for a pictorial representation.
  - Click on **Campaigns** to see activity you have “tagged” as a campaign or UTM string. (To “tag” inbound links as from a Bing advertising campaign, a Facebook or Twitter campaign, etc., see <http://jmlinks.com/15d>.)
- Click on **Behavior** to see what people do on your website.

- Click on **Behavior Flow** for a nice, pictorial map of how people “flow” through your website.
- Click on **Site Content** and then drill down to **All Pages** (your most trafficked pages), **Landing Pages** (first page they touch), and **Exit Pages** (last page they touch).
- Click on **Site Speed** for information on how fast your website is, including **Speed Suggestions**.
- Click on **Conversions** to see whether traffic is “converting,” usually buying stuff on eCommerce and/or filling out feedback forms as sales leads.
  - Click on **Goals** (if you have defined goals, see below) to see what goals exist and whether they are converting.
    - You can also drill down into *Reverse Goal Path*, *Funnel Visualization*, and *Goal Flow* for some visuals about how people get to your goals and whether or not they convert.
  - Click on **Goals, Reverse Goal Path, and Funnel Visualization** (if you have defined these elements to see the paths taken to/from a goal).
  - Click on **eCommerce** (if you are running an eCommerce site) for information on purchases.

Basic Google Analytics provides you with key information on incoming web traffic, such as geographic location, mobile platform, and browser version. Finally, you can click on the date field at the top far right of Analytics to change the date filter for data or to compare two time periods.

## » USE ADVANCED FEATURES IN GOOGLE ANALYTICS

Beyond Basic Analytics, there are advanced features in Google Analytics that you do not want to miss. One feature is called **Page Analytics**. To activate it, first, install the Page Analytics Plugin for Chrome (<http://jmlinks.com/18z>). Next, make sure you are logged into Google Analytics and then visit your website. On the top right of the Chrome browser, you’ll see a little orange icon with a squiggly line in it. Make sure this says enabled. Here’s a screenshot:



It's very easy to miss! It's very small and in the top right of the Chrome browser. With that turned on, then visit your website. If the Force is with you, Google Analytics will populate your website with little orange percentage icons that tell you what percent of people are clicking where on any page on your website. Here's a screenshot from JasonMcDonald.org:



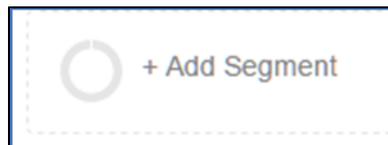
This tells you that on my homepage, 9.5% of the people click on the link for “SEO Consultant,” and 5.1% click on “Social Media Expert.” I highly recommend that you

enable this add-on to Chrome and browse your site to see how users flow through your website. It's amazing!

## Segments in Google Analytics

Next, return to Google Analytics proper, and let's explore **segments**. Segments allow you to “slice” and “dice” your data based on criteria such as “new visitors” vs. “repeat visitors” or the geographic locations from which visitors come. Imagine that you want to see how people from Oklahoma behave on your website vs. people from Texas or whether people who come from Facebook convert better than people from Twitter. That's what Segments allow.

Unfortunately, however, Google hides this feature behind the “Add Segment” area when you first log in. Simply click on that to bring forth Segments:



Segments offer “pre-built segments,” available on the left-hand side under *View Segments > System*. Here you'll find segments such as “Mobile and Tablet Traffic.” Click this to “filter” your data to see **ONLY** people coming from mobile phones and tablets, for example. Others of note are:

**Organic Traffic.** Click here to filter and see **ONLY** traffic from search engines.

**Paid Traffic.** Click here to filter and see **ONLY** traffic from AdWords and other forms of paid advertising as on Bing or Yahoo.

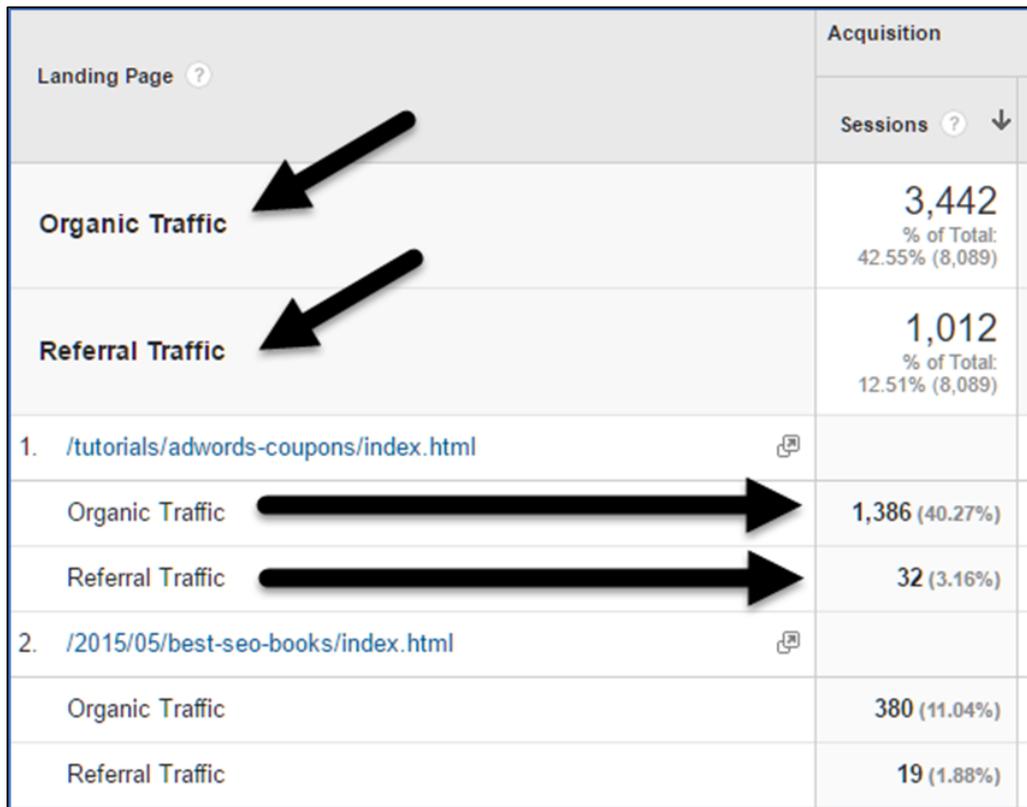
**Referral Traffic.** Click here to filter and see **ONLY** traffic from links on other websites.

**Sessions with Conversions.** Click here to filter and see ONLY traffic that actually converted (completed a goal or made a purchase). (Note: this requires that you first establish at least one goal in Analytics or connect Google Analytics to your e-commerce platform).

**Tablet and Desktop Traffic.** Click here to filter and see ONLY traffic from tablets or desktops.

The concept is to *first* click on a Segment, and *then* click the blue **Apply** button. *Next*, with these Segments on, browse other data in Google Analytics on the right menu such as the Geo information, or landing page information to see what’s going on with respect to ONLY that Segment. You can enable up to four segments to compare at any given time. (For help with Google Segments, visit <http://jmlinks.com/15e>).

For example, here’s a screenshot comparing “Organic Traffic” and “Referral Traffic” by looking at landing pages:



Landing Page ?		Acquisition
		Sessions ? ↓
Organic Traffic		3,442 % of Total: 42.55% (8,089)
Referral Traffic		1,012 % of Total: 12.51% (8,089)
1. /tutorials/adwords-coupons/index.html		
Organic Traffic		1,386 (40.27%)
Referral Traffic		32 (3.16%)
2. /2015/05/best-seo-books/index.html		
Organic Traffic		380 (11.04%)
Referral Traffic		19 (1.88%)

This shows that organic traffic was responsible for 1,386 visits to the AdWords Coupon page vs. only 32 for referral traffic. In this way, you can compare / contrast traffic sources or other elements as you scroll through AdWords data. It's marketing "slicing and dicing" at its best!

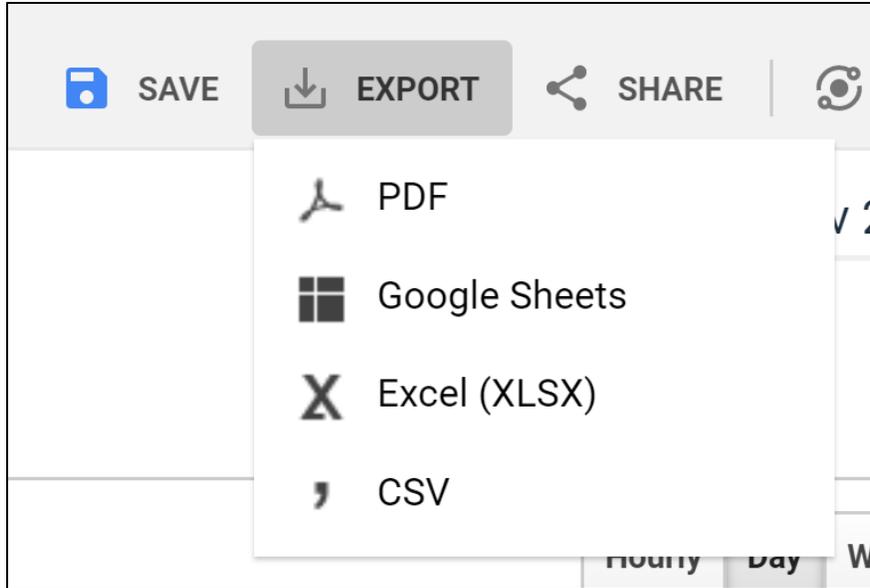
## **Custom Segments**

You don't have to be content with the pre-built segments in Google Analytics. Simply click on the red "New Segment" button and follow the step-by-step wizard to create a custom segment. Scroll down the left-hand menu to filter your data by parameter; "conditions" is probably the most useful feature here. Remember to use the "Help" file (available top right, under the three dots) if you don't understand what a term means. You can read the Google help file on how to create a custom segment at <http://jmlinks.com/19b>.

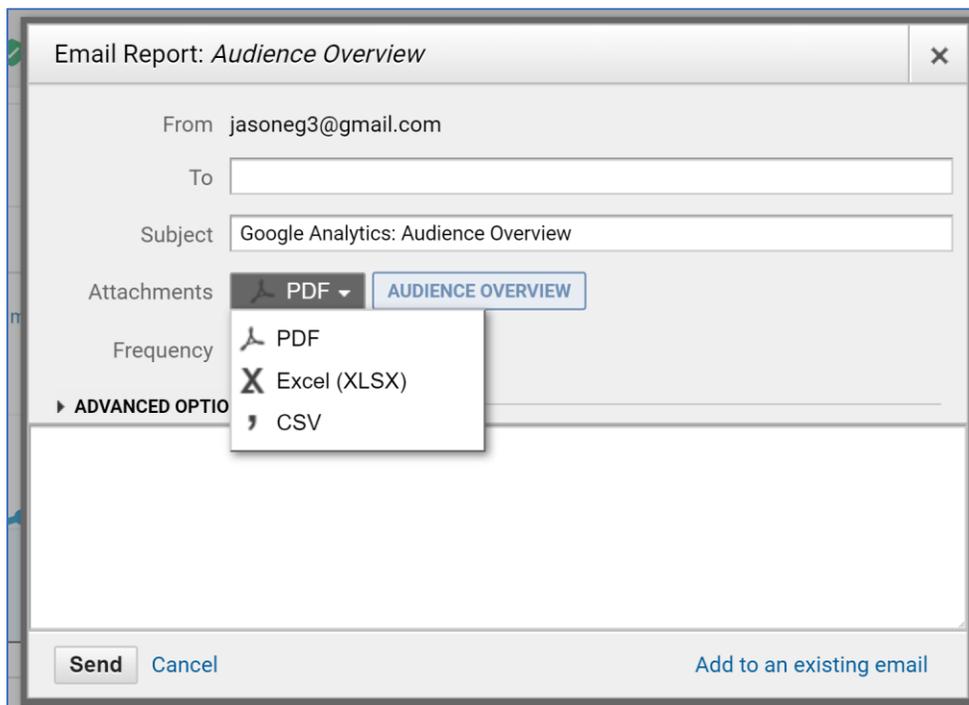
You can use a custom segment, for example, to track user behavior that originates in a newsletter, a Facebook ad campaign, or even to compare the behavior of people from Texas vs. people from Oklahoma.

## **Creating and Emailing Reports**

Throughout Google Analytics, you can take any "view" that you set up an "export it" by clicking on "export" in the top right. Here's a screenshot:



If you click on “Share” (again as indicated in the top right, above), you can email any report you create. For example, you could set up a custom segment to look only at your Oklahoma traffic and then have Google automatically download and email this “report” every 1<sup>st</sup> of the month. Here’s a screenshot:



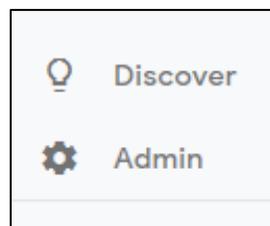
## Goals and Conversions

Having played around with segments, next set up “Goals” for Analytics by registering your “Thank you” page after a registration or purchase. A goal is something you want people to do on your website. Common goals are:

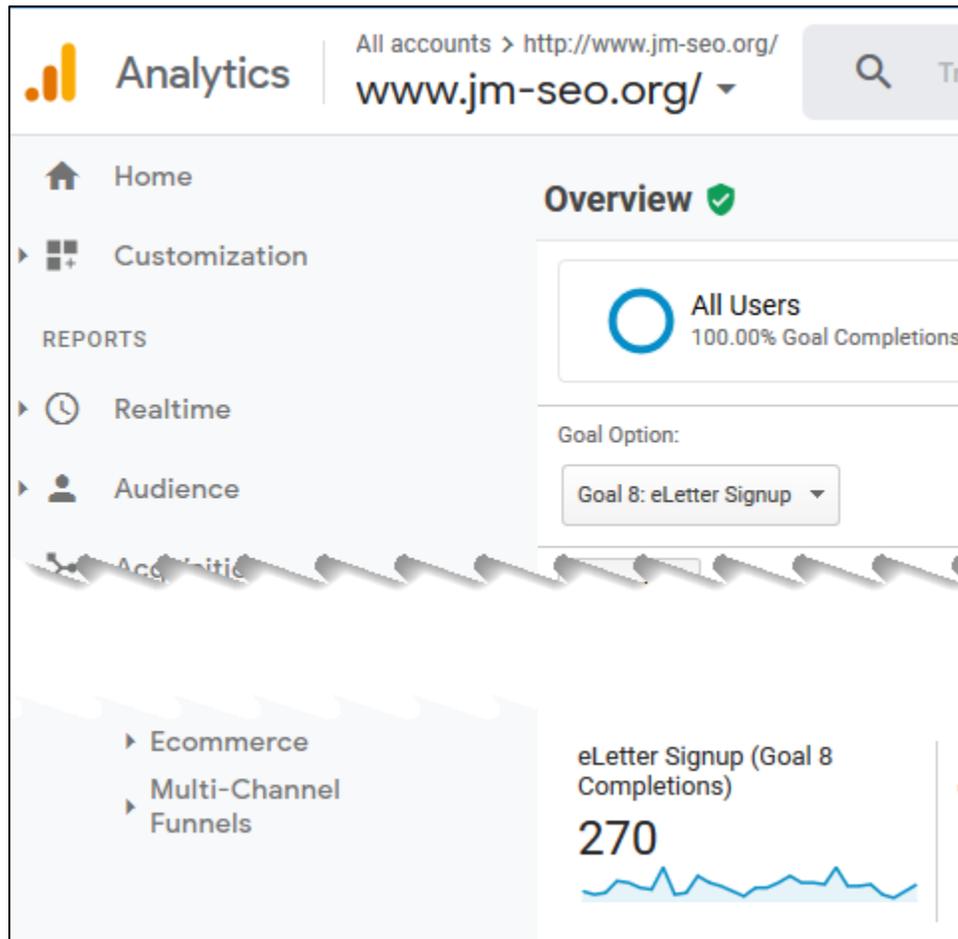
1. Fill out an inquiry form.
2. Sign up for an email newsletter.
3. Make an e-commerce purchase.

In each case, find the URL for the “thank you” page, and record that. You’ll use this “Thank You” URL as your goal in Analytics. For example, if you send a web inquiry via JM-SEO.org, you’ll end up at <https://www.jm-seo.org/thanks/>, which becomes the URL / goal for web inquiries.

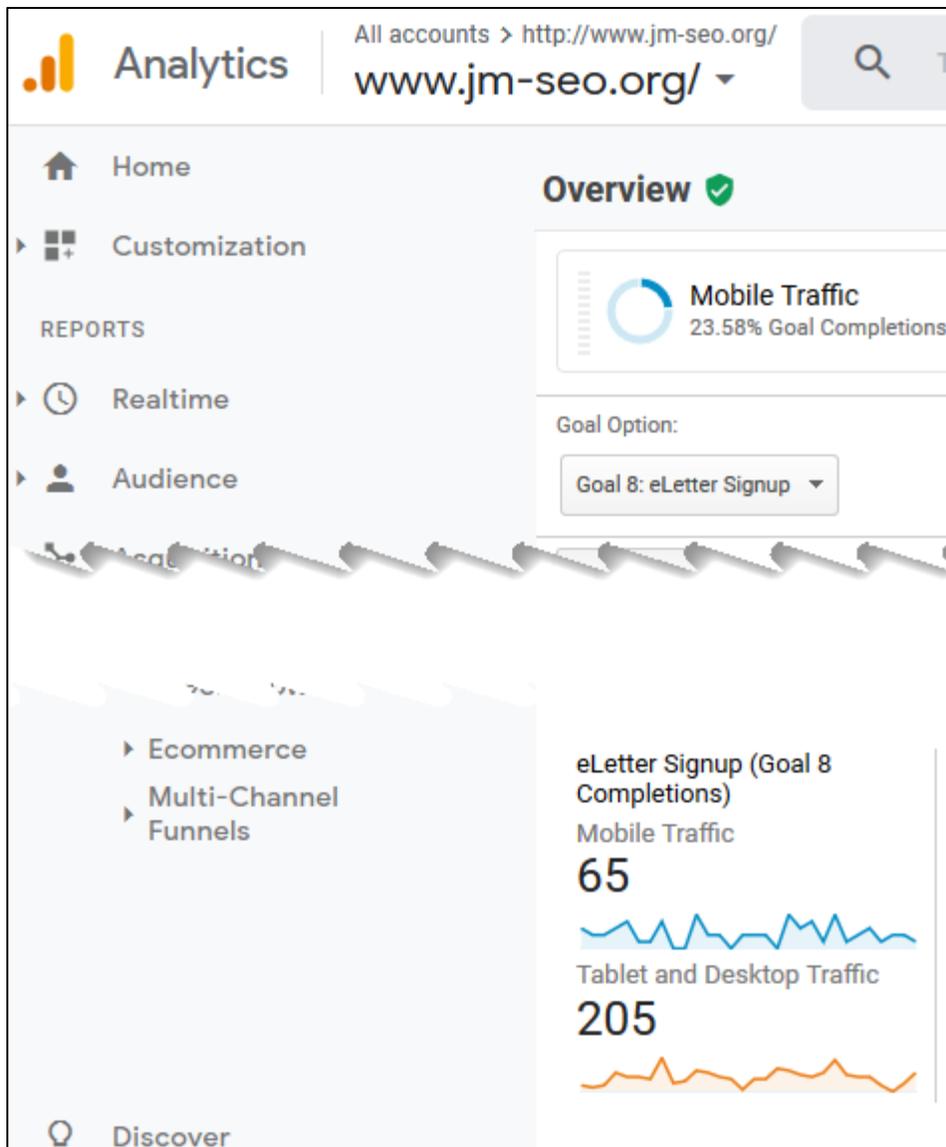
To set up a goal, go to the primary login page on Analytics by clicking on “gear icon” at the **bottom left corner** inside of Google Analytics. Here’s a screenshot:



Next, click on your profile name (usually your website URL). Then click on “goals” in the middle of the page. Here is where you define a “goal” and a “funnel,” which is the steps taken to reach the goal. Once you’ve defined a goal, Google Analytics will happily record the complete goals under the “Conversions” tab on the left in Analytics. Here’s a screenshot showing that JM-SEO.org received 270 eLetter sign-ups or goal #8’s in October 2020:



Note that if you enable one or more segments such as All Traffic, Mobile Traffic, and Tablet / Desktop Traffic, you can compare segments against goals. For example, here's the same goal comparing Mobile vs. Tablet / Desktop traffic, showing I received 65 signups from mobile and 205 from desktop:



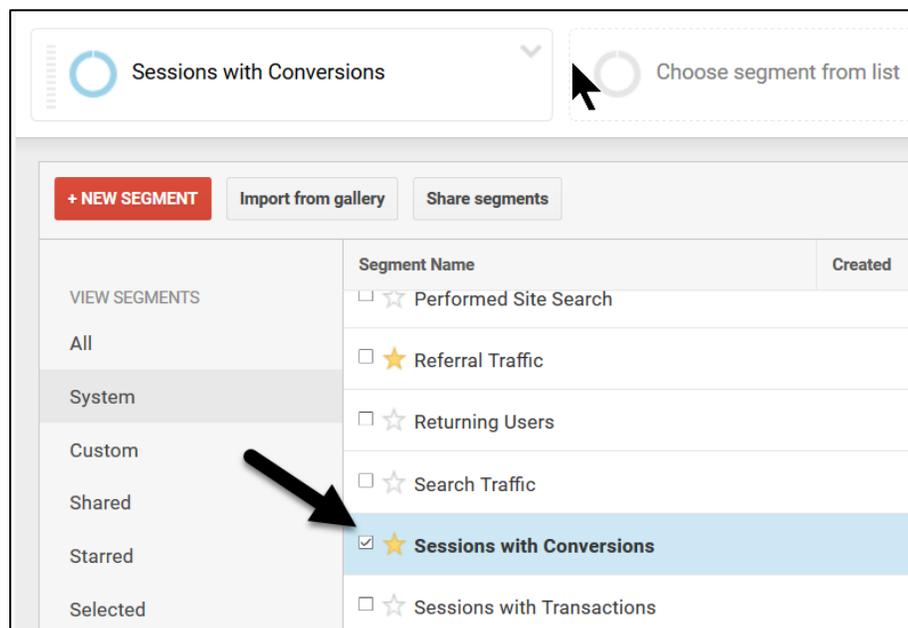
You can also change your time horizon (top right), express this information graphically, and export it into a PDF or automated email. In Advanced Analytics, you can therefore see not only how people get to your website but the steps that they take as they click through your website up to a goal, and you can use Segments to slice and dice which people are more or less likely to complete a goal.

**VIDEO.** Watch a video on how to set up goals in Google Analytics at <http://jmlinks.com/17z>.

For detailed help with goals, visit the official explanation at <http://jmlinks.com/19a>. Note: if you connect your e-commerce platform to Google Analytics, it will automatically take completed sales as “goals,” which is pretty nifty as you can “slice and dice” your customers via segments to figure out who converts and who doesn’t.

## Sessions with Conversions

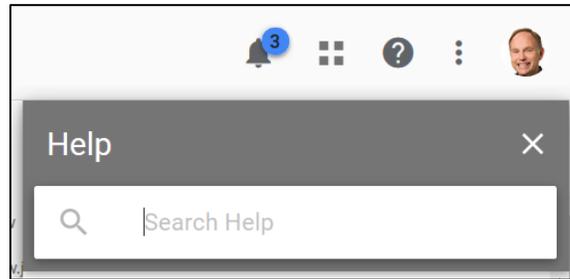
Finally, once you’ve enabled at least one goal or connected to e-commerce, Google Analytics turns on a very important segment: Sessions with Conversions. Turn that on by accessing the Segments Menu and then System. Here’s a screenshot:



With “Sessions with Conversions” turned on, you can then browse through Google Analytics, looking at only those people who completed a goal / conversion. This is as if Macy’s could analyze the store behavior of only those people who actually bought something vs. everyone else who was “just looking.” The “Session with Conversions” segment is a fantastic way to cut out the noise and discover how you’re getting your most valuable web traffic, the traffic that converts.

## Help in Google Analytics

*Help* is available at the **top right** corner under the “Question Mark” icon on the top right inside of Google Analytics. Here’s a screenshot:



Another way to find “Help” is to visit <https://support.google.com/analytics/>. Once there, type in your query, such as “What is a Bounce Rate?” and you’ll find pretty good answers.

## Google Analytics Learning Resources

Finally, don’t miss some of the free official Google videos available for learning more about Analytics. These are located at the **Google Analytics Academy** at <http://jmlinks.com/42d>. Ironically, these Analytics IQ Lessons are hard to find inside of Analytics. (They’re hiding under the “Discover” tab at the far left). Click on “Discover,” and you’ll see not only the Analytics Academy but also links to the Help Center, Analytics Blog, and other tools that work with Google Analytics. Be sure to check out Google Data Studio (<https://datastudio.google.com/>) and Google Optimize (<https://optimize.google.com/>), which are Google’s latest and greatest reporting and analysis tools built on top of Analytics.

## »» CHECKLIST: METRICS ACTION ITEMS

Test your knowledge of metrics! Take the *metrics and Google Analytics quiz* at <http://jmlinks.com/qzme>. Next, here are your keyword **Action Items**:

- Define** what you want to measure, including your **KPIs**, ranging from your rank on Google to completed actions like feedback forms.
  - Systematically measure your **rank** on Google each month. If possible, subscribe to a paid tool as they are easier to use than manual rank checking.
  - If appropriate, measure your **rank vs. local keywords** into the “local pack” on Google.
  - Measure your **review count** on Google and Yelp, as well as your aggregate review stars.
  - Measure your **domain authority** to gain knowledge on your link-building efforts. Keep track of the links you are earning each and every month!
- Use **Google Analytics** basic features to learn about what happens once people land on your website.
  - Set up both a UA and GA4 version of Google Analytics; begin to learn how to use GA4 in preparation for the forced transition into GA4 in July 2023.
  - Measure the flow of traffic into your website: **sessions > bounces or further views > conversions or goals**. Ponder where your traffic is coming from, why or why not it bounces, what page content is interesting to your targets, and what drives conversions.
  - Use **segments** to slice and dice your data by customer type, origin, or other parameters.

- ❑ Define **goals** such as feedback forms or eCommerce sales to measure what's converting, what's not, and why.
- ❑ Take the **knowledge** obtained from your metrics effort, make **changes** to your website strategy and content, and continually **improve** the ROI from your SEO efforts. Continually optimize your site to not only get more traffic but to get more traffic that converts to your desired goals.

Check out the **free tools**! Go to my *SEO Dashboard > Metrics* for my favorite free tools for Google Analytics and metrics. Just visit <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>.

### »» **DELIVERABLE: GOOGLE ANALYTICS WORKSHEET**

The **DELIVERABLE** for this Chapter is a completed Google Analytics worksheet. For the worksheet, go to <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z> (reenter the passcode “seo2023z” to register if you have not already done so), and click on the link to the “Google Analytics worksheet.”



# 7.1

## LEARNING

SEO is a competitive game that never stops evolving! The Google algorithm changes and adjusts, user behavior evolves, and your competitors also improve their SEO skills. Recently, for example, social media and mobile search have become ever more important to SEO, as have both localization and personalization issues. Google continues to consolidate search results between mobile and desktop, and Panda and Penguin continue to evolve. In 2023, the transition continues to “voice search” and “artificial intelligence,” which no real clarity on what that means (especially the “intelligence” in “artificial intelligence.”) Google is terminating UA and replacing it with GA4. New algorithm changes are no doubt in the works over at the Googleplex!

All require the successful practitioner of SEO to adapt.

“Never stop learning” must be your motto! In this Chapter, I point to resources to help you be a life-long learner.

**Let’s get started!**

### TO-DO LIST:

- » Download the Free Companion *Marketing Almanac*
- » Use the Worksheets
- » Bookmark and Read SEO Media Resources
- » A Final Request: Please Review me on Amazon

### » DOWNLOAD THE FREE COMPANION MARKETING ALMANAC

The *Marketing Almanac* is a companion to this *SEO Workbook* and contains hundreds of free tools organized by category. In it, for example, you’ll find every free keyword tool,

every link-building tool, and every local SEO that I know of. It's focused on free resources, and it's a free companion to this Workbook.

Register for **free** materials, including my Marketing Almanac, SEO Dashboard, and companion worksheets to this book at <http://jmlinks.com/seo2023z>. Re-enter the password “**seo2023z**” when prompted.

You can also access my dashboard directly at <http://jmlinks.com/seodash>. That has links to the Toolbook, plus my favorite tools are easy to click and organized by topics / Chapters.

If you know of any other free tools, please email me as I am always on the lookout!

### » USE THE WORKSHEETS, RESOURCES, VIDEOS, AND QUIZZES

Throughout this *SEO Workbook*, I have referenced helpful worksheets, videos, and resources. Don't miss the fun-filled quizzes. These follow the Seven Steps methodology and can be accessed at the book landing page after you have registered.

**VIDEO.** Browse available YouTube videos at <http://jmlinks.com/19c>.

Subscribe to my YouTube channel as well as free alerts on free toolbooks at <http://jmlinks.com/free>.

### » BOOKMARK AND READ SEO MEDIA RESOURCES

SEO changes frequently, so I urge you to pay attention to Google directly as well as the many wonderful blogs that cover search engine optimization. Those are available in the *Marketing Almanac*.

## Stay Informed: Blogs, Conferences, and Books

Among the best blogs, I recommend *Search Engine Land* (<http://searchengineland.com/>) and *Search Engine Journal* (<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/>) in particular, as well as the SMX conference (<https://marketinglandevents.com/smx/>). I also recommend checking Amazon for new books on SEO; don't take my word for it – pay attention to what other experts and gurus say about search engine optimization. In terms of books, here's a direct link to Amazon's SEO bestseller list: <http://jmlinks.com/15h>. If you're looking for a “deep dive” book in terms of technical SEO, I highly recommend Eric Enge, Stephan Spencer, and Jessie Stricchiola's *The Art of SEO: Mastering Search Engine Optimization* at <http://jmlinks.com/15j>. Another good one is the 2020 edition of *SEO For Dummies* by Peter Kent at <http://jmlinks.com/51z>. Both books assume you know the basics as taught in my book and then lead you deep into the jungle of technical search engine optimization.

## NEVER STOP LEARNING

If you have any problems, questions, or comments, or just want to talk about life and SEO, please email me at [jason.mcdonald@jm-seo.net](mailto:jason.mcdonald@jm-seo.net), via <http://jmlinks.com/contact>, or call 800-298-4065 for help. Good luck!

### » A FINAL REQUEST: PLEASE WRITE A REVIEW ON AMAZON

If you've read this far, I want to extend my profound thanks. It's a true labor of love to write any book, and this book is no exception. If you have a spare moment and the spirit moves you, I would really appreciate an honest review of the *SEO Workbook* on Amazon.

- Here's a link directly to the book on Amazon: <http://jmlinks.com/seorev>. Just visit that link and write your short, honest review of the book.

When you've done so, please send me a quick email. Thanks in advance for your support.

Never stop learning!

~ Jason McDonald

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# SURVEY OFFER

## **CLAIM YOUR \$5 SURVEY REBATE! HERE'S HOW -**

- Visit <http://jmlinks.com/survey>.
- Take a short, simple survey about the book.
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