SEO Planning: Customizing Your Strategy

SEO, once a highly specialized and often marginalized task relegated to the back rooms of website development teams, is now a mainstream digital marketing activity. Its dramatic rise can be attributed to various emerging trends, including:

- Search engines now drive a large volume of highly targeted traffic from people intent on accomplishing research-based, purchase-oriented, and content consumption goals. Businesses can earn significant revenues by leveraging the quality and relevance of this traffic for direct sales, customer acquisition, and content and branding/awareness campaigns.

- Visibility in search engines creates an implied endorsement effect, whereby searchers associate quality, relevance, and trustworthiness with sites that rank highly for their queries.

- Dramatic growth in the interaction between offline and online marketing necessitates investment by organizations of all kinds in a successful search strategy. Consumers are increasingly turning to the Internet for tasks ranging from researching purchases in verticals such as real estate, automobiles, and technology to finding local resources for health and wellness services. At this stage, businesses simply cannot afford to ignore their customers' needs as expressed through searches conducted on the major search engines.

Search engine optimization is a technical marketing function that relies upon both content creation and technological development, and success in organic search greatly depends upon various technical and analytical tools that provide access to valuable data necessary for ongoing SEO and website improvement, as well as overall user experience optimization. The intersection of and interdependence between website technology and online marketing has become clear, and essential—and SEO was at the

forefront of this trend. New conference events such as MarTech (produced by Third Door Media, the company behind Search Engine Land and Search Marketing Expo) are beginning to provide platforms for learning and growth within the powerful intersection of marketing and technology.

As with all marketing functions, specific goal setting is required for success to be measured and achieved. While SEO can be viewed as a *project* (and there are certainly situations in which SEO "projects" exist) the best investment, in our opinion, is to treat it as more of a *process*—one that is iterative and ongoing, and requires steady commitment from the stakeholders of an organization.

An ongoing investment is needed to create a site with the proper content, architecture, and overall foundation for SEO success. The results may not appear instantly, but a business that makes a patient and prudent commitment to SEO, invests in quality content development, constructs a crawlable site architecture, and earns legitimate linking relationships will be handsomely rewarded.

Strategic Goals SEO Practitioners Can Fulfill

Organic search, as a source of highly targeted traffic, is one of many viable online marketing channels. And while SEO is not a cure-all for businesses, it can fit into a company's overall business strategy in several critical ways.

Visibility (Branding)

Many consumers assume that top placement in search engines is like a stamp of approval on a brand. Surely a company could not rank highly in search results if it were not one of the best in its field, right?

If you are an experienced search engine user, you probably recognize that the preceding statement is not always true. However, the fact is that many consumers, and even sophisticated web searchers, interpret high search rankings as an implicit brand endorsement.

Therefore, for critical brand terms, an SEO strategy should be geared toward increasing organic search exposure for branded keywords.

In addition to targeting brand terms, you will want to rank well for nonbranded search terms that are specific to your core business (a highly competitive, but highly rewarding, branding effort). When searchers see you ranking highly on these types of search terms, they will associate your brand with the product or service and assume you are one of the best places to purchase from.

The list of situations where the brand can also limit the SEO strategy is quite long, and the opposite can happen too, where the nature of the brand makes a particular SEO

strategy pretty compelling. Ultimately, your goal is to dovetail SEO efforts with branding as seamlessly as possible.

Website Traffic

Long gone are the days of a "build it and they will come" paradigm online. Today's search environment is highly competitive, and you need great SEO to capture targeted, high-quality traffic to your site.

While a business that engages with many of its customers through offline channels can drive traffic by telling those customers to visit its website, SEO fills the different, more critical role of bringing new prospects to your website from an audience of people who might not otherwise have been interested in, or perhaps even aware of, your business at all.

Experienced SEO professionals understand that users search for products, services, and information using an extraordinarily wide variety of search queries and query types. Developing an SEO strategy involves performing extensive keyword research (which we will discuss in Chapter 5) to determine which search queries people actually use. For example, when interested in purchasing a fuel-efficient car, a searcher might type in *hybrid efficient cars*. In this instance, the search marketing manager for a manufacturer of electric cars might be interested in search exposure for this traffic, even though technically, *electric cars* was not in the original search query.

Some users may not even know that a company specializing in a specific type of product exists until they perform that search. Or, if they have at one time learned about such a manufacturer, they might not remember enough about it to seek out the manufacturer's website directly.

Capturing that traffic could provide the manufacturer with incremental sales of its electric vehicles that it probably would not have gotten otherwise. Knowing these factors, the SEO process involves developing a site architecture strategy (see Chapter 6) and a content development/editorial strategy (Chapter 7) to help the site's pages achieve competitive search engine exposure for a broad range of potentially relevant terms.

High Return on Investment

Increasing online visibility and driving targeted traffic are the first steps to success with SEO. The next step is measuring the performance of that traffic to determine whether the overall website and business objectives are being achieved. This is an ongoing, iterative process that will always accompany all marketing efforts, and SEO is no exception. For most organizations, goals are defined as generating sales, leads, or advertising revenue. For others, goals may include promoting a particular message; consuming, sharing, or perhaps creating specific types of content; or gaining simple signups for a

newsletter. An important component of SEO is to deliver not just traffic, but *targeted traffic* that has the potential to convert into these actions. Whether you are selling products and services, advertising for branding value, or trying to promote specific content to the world, a well-designed SEO strategy can result in a very high return on investment (ROI) when contrasted with other methods of marketing.

SEO generally brings a higher ROI when compared to TV, print, and radio advertising campaigns; and while traditional media is not in danger of being replaced by SEO, organic search can provide some high-margin returns that complement and enhance the use of offline media—especially when done properly over the long haul (see Figure 3-1).
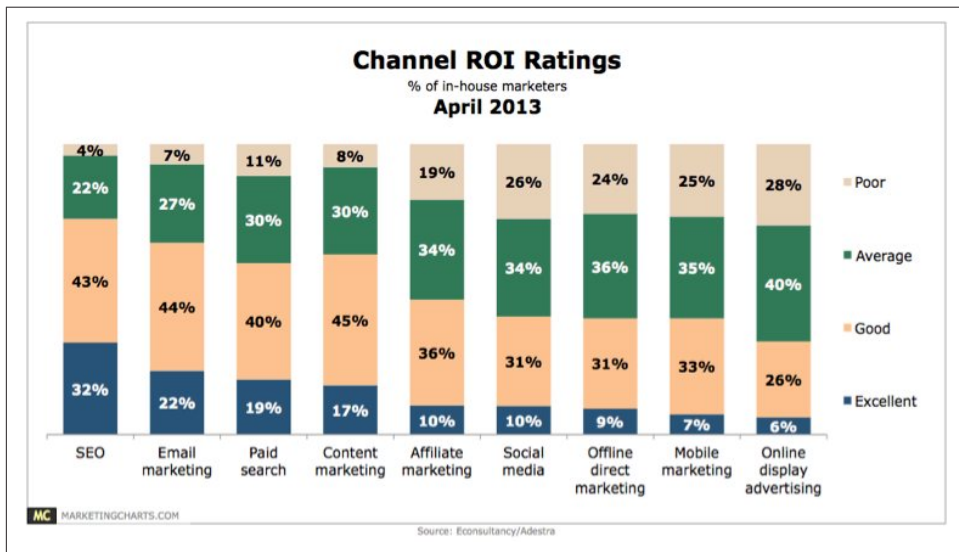

Figure 3-1. *SEO, a high-ROI activity*

In addition, a growing number of businesses operate purely online. Some examples of these are LinkedIn, Zappos, Amazon, and eBay.

Every SEO Strategy Should Be Customized

There is no such thing as a cookie-cutter SEO strategy (and if someone is trying to sell you one, be sure to dig deeper and get second opinions!). There is a difference between best practices, which are universal, and a business- and website-specific SEO strategy. The ever-changing, dynamic nature of the search marketing industry requires constant diligence, and SEO professionals must maintain a research process for analyzing how the search landscape is changing.

You must take the following factors into account when developing your SEO strategy:

- <u>What</u> the organization is trying to <u>promote</u> (service, product, content)

- Who the <u>target market</u> is (can be as simple as "women" or as detailed as personas)

- <u>Brand</u> (includes copy and messaging)

- <u>Website structure</u> (includes site architecture, navigational elements, and file/URL naming conventions)

- <u>Current site content assets</u> (includes images, videos, PDF files, white papers, case studies, articles)

- Ease with <u>which the content and site structure can be modified</u> (involves the CMS and web development teams)

- Editorial resources and calendar for content development (what content is developed, by whom, and on what timeline)

- Competitive landscape

Learning about the specific market a business is in is an obvious first step toward developing industry familiarity, trends, and vernacular—but it often makes sense for two businesses offering the same products in the market to use different SEO strategies.

For example, if Competitor 1 published its website four years ago, and Competitor 2 is just launching its site now, Competitor 2 may gain the most traction by focusing on specific vertical areas where Competitor 1's offering or SEO implementation is weak.

It is important to not underestimate the importance of a well-thought-out SEO strategy. Skipping over this process or not treating it seriously can hamper your prospects for growth.

Understanding Search Engine Traffic and Visitor Intent

As we discussed in "The Mission of Search Engines" on page 42, searchers enter many different types of queries. These can generally be classified into three major categories:

Navigational query
    This is a query with the intent to arrive at a specific website or page (e.g., the person types in your company domain name, *www.companyname.com*, or simply types in the word *facebook*).

Informational query
    This is a search performed to receive an answer to a broad or direct question, or to research and explore information around a specific topic with no specific source in mind (e.g., *yoga poses*).

Transactional query
> A person who types in *digital camera* may be looking to buy one now, but it is equally possible that she is researching digital cameras to learn about how they are different from film cameras. This is an example of an initial transactional query, which can evolve in stages. For example, here are some other types of transactional queries that occur at a later stage in the buying cycle:
>
> - The user types in *best online digital camera store*. Although there is no information in the query about which one she wants to buy, the intent is clearer that the searcher is seeking a store, not simply information about types of digital cameras.
>
> - The searcher types in *olympus OMD lowest price*. The chances are very high that this user is looking to buy that particular camera.

Part of an SEO strategy is to understand how the various types of searches relate to the content and architecture of your website.

Developing an SEO Plan Prior to Site Development

It is widely understood in the SEO industry that SEO should be built in, as early as possible, to the entire site development strategy—from choosing a content management system (CMS) and planning site architecture to creating, optimizing, and publishing site content. As you will see in Chapter 6, SEO is deeply intertwined with these areas.

SEO plans have many moving parts, and SEO-related decisions can and usually do have a significant impact on other departments, such as web development, content development and editorial, other marketing groups (direct, offline, etc.), and sales. Integrating these moving parts and aligning them with each other is essential to developing an SEO-friendly website and establishing a strong foundation for enduring organic visibility.

Business Factors That Impact Your SEO Strategy

Here are some examples of business issues that can impact SEO:

Revenue and business models
> The effective SEO strategy takes into account the purpose of the site—whether it is to sell products, sell advertising, obtain leads, or gain membership signups. We will discuss this more in the later sections of this chapter.

Target customers

Who are you trying to reach? This could be an age group, a gender group, or as specific as people looking to buy a house within a specific neighborhood of San Francisco, California.

Competitors

The competitive landscape is another big factor in your overall strategy. Competition may be strongly entrenched in one portion of the market online, and it may make sense to focus on a different segment. Or you may be the current leader in your market and want to protect this position while continuing to build your customer base.

Branding goals

There may be search terms for which it is critical that you have top search exposure, for branding reasons.

Content development

An important part of SEO and general online success is the creation and optimization of high-quality content for your users. For most businesses, your capacity to create quality content on an ongoing basis can significantly improve your SEO efforts, both from a content-availability perspective (more content in the search engines) and from a user engagement and link development perspective (great content breeds great links and social sharing, both of which can positively influence SEO).

How people search for products like yours

Understanding what customers do when they are searching for products or services like yours is one of the most basic functions of SEO, which we will discuss in detail in Chapter 5. This involves mapping the actual search queries your target customers use when they go to a search engine.

Understanding Your Audience and Finding Your Niche

Your target audience should drive the initial site design, and should inform your SEO and content development strategies. As you will see in this section, there are many related considerations here, including your competition and the particular strengths or weaknesses of your own company.

Mapping Your Products and Services

Successful SEO requires a thorough understanding of your business. What products, services, and types of information and resources do you have to offer your site visitors and potential customers?

As we outlined in the preceding section, a critical component of SEO is understanding who is searching for what you are trying to promote, and this requires thoroughly understanding all aspects of your offering. You will need to understand both the broad and specific market categories that your products fall into, as each of these categories might relate to sections of your website that you will likely need to create. By having content areas of the site for those categories, you create the opportunity to obtain organic search traffic related to those categories.

You also should consider business development and the company's expansion strategy at the outset of the SEO planning process. Consider Amazon, which began as a bookseller but has evolved into a general-purpose e-tailer; sites that go through these types of changes may need to be substantially restructured, and such restructurings can be a source of major SEO headaches. Anticipating and planning for these types of changes in advance provides the opportunity to identify and execute appropriate architectural approaches to developing and optimizing the site.

Understanding That Content Is King

It has been debated since the late 1990s: whether content is king in SEO. Not only is content king for SEO purposes, but as the main driver of engagement on the Web, it is also one of the most important elements of any online effort. Development of high-quality, engaging content for your users increases the available real estate for organic search queries; provides your users reason to enjoy your site and compels them to become customers; and invites promotion and exposure through users sharing your content online, on social media platforms and via direct links from other websites. Determining your available content assets is the first step toward leveraging them within the context of SEO. You may have a deep library of "how to" content, great testimonial or product demonstration videos, a unique photo gallery, or an awesome tool that people are interested in using. All of these content types can be invaluable in building a world-class website that does well in both search engines and the overall web ecosystem.

The content you have available to you will also affect your keyword research and your site architecture, as your content is the major source of information that search engines use to determine what your site is about. As we discussed in "Algorithm-Based Ranking Systems: Crawling, Indexing, and Ranking" on page 78, you need relevant content to even be "in the game" in search (i.e., if someone searches for *hybrid efficient cars* and you don't have any content related to hybrid efficient cars, chances are good that you won't rank for that search query).

As we will discuss in Chapter 7, on-site content also affects content marketing and link development. Content marketing can be very similar to PR in that the success of your efforts is integrally related to what you are promoting (i.e., what type of content, and of what quality, are you hoping others will link to?).

Consider Site A, a site that has built a substantial, well-researched and well-written set of articles on a specific topic. However, 20 other sites out there have equally substantial sets of articles on the same topic, and many of these other sites have been in the major search engine indexes for much longer than Site A.

Site A has a content quality concern—namely, why would someone link to its articles over the articles from any of the other 20 websites? There is nothing new there. Chances are that Site A will succeed in getting some links to its articles; however, it will likely never be able to establish itself as a leader if it has nothing new or unique to offer.

To establish itself as a leader, Site A must create fresh, unique, engaging content that differentiates the site from its competitors. Perhaps it can offer a solution to a problem that no one else has been able to solve before, or perhaps it focuses on a specific vertical niche and establishes itself as a leader in that niche—for example, by being the first to release a high-quality video series on the topic it covers.

One of the most important decisions Site A's leadership needs to make is where and how they are going to establish themselves as an authoritative resource in their industry. If they plan to make their website a major player in capturing market-related search engine traffic, this is not an optional step.

When looking at content plans and hopefully establishing an editorial calendar, it is critical to consider not only what you already have, but also what you could develop. This, of course, relates to budget. A publisher with no budget to spend on content development has few choices that she can make in her SEO strategy, whereas another publisher who has a team of in-house content developers has a myriad of options.

Segmenting Your Site's Audience

Let's not forget the audience! It is important for the SEO practitioner to understand the target audience. For example, Site A may be a website that sells sneakers. As a result, the site's developers go out and implement a brilliant campaign to rank for the "sneaker" terms they consider relevant. Being young and energetic, they focus on the way their peers search for sneakers—but what if the target audience for the sneakers Site A sells are age 50 or older? This segmentation goes to the very core of deciding what pages to create on your site, and what content to put on them.

The target audience for Site A (the over-50 crowd) may use different search terms than the younger generation to search for sneakers, which means Site A may well be bringing in search traffic from people who are not interested in its products, and not bringing in traffic from those who might be! For example, Skechers, a California-based shoe company, made the business decision to pivot from being a youth brand to targeting an older demographic with their shoes—so an SEO strategy for selling Skechers

sneakers at this stage, then, would be very different from an SEO strategy for the more youth-oriented Nike sneakers.

Similar things can happen with gender, as women and men may not search for their shoes the same way. Figure 3-2 lists the top shoe-related search terms from Wordtracker for searches related to *womens shoes* and *mens shoes*.

Keyword	Volume
womens shoes	33,419
womens shoes online	4,465
womens boots shoes	2,912
womens high heel shoes	2,887
cheap womens shoes	2,740
womens boot shoes	2,680
salomon womens shoes sale	2,093
womens fashion shoes	2,084
clarks womens shoes	1,697
ebay womens shoes	1,679

Keyword	Volume
mens shoes	14,641
mens tennis shoes	2,035
mens dress shoes	1,440
mens shoes stores	1,387
buy mens shoes online	1,351
mens fashion shoes	1,217
mens clothing shoes	1,176
mens walking shoes	1,111
mens shoes online	1,049
mens sports shoes	1,007

Figure 3-2. *Keyword search term variation examples by gender*

As you can see in the figure, search terms used can vary significantly by gender.

Another major element to consider might be location. Searchers in Austin, Texas, may want a different version of your product than searchers in Chicago, Illinois. For that matter, because they want different products and are in different regions, they may be looking for something specific to their region and may use different vernacular—all factors that influence a user's choice of search terms. Understanding these variables and identifying appropriate traffic targets requires extensive keyword research—yet another critical aspect of the SEO process.

Understanding Context: Market Competitiveness

A critical factor to understand before you launch your SEO efforts is the nature of the market in which you are competing. This tells you how competitive the environment is in general, and augmented with additional research, this information can tell you how competitive the SEO environment is specifically. In some markets, natural search is intensively competitive.

Market competitiveness does not mean you should give up on competing, especially if it is already the focus of your business; however, you might choose to focus your SEO efforts on less competitive terms that can still bring you many qualified leads.

To get a very quick read on keyword competitiveness, use the Google AdWords Keyword Planner to see what your cost per click (CPC) could be if you bid on your target phrase in a pay-per-click (PPC) campaign. Higher CPC prices in Google AdWords often mean that the terms are more competitive in organic search as well.

Your SEO strategy can also be influenced by your competitors' strategies, so understanding what they are doing is a critical part of the process for both SEO and business intelligence objectives. There are several scenarios you might encounter:

- The competitor discovers a unique, highly converting set of keywords.
- The competitor discovers a targeted, high-value link from an authoritative source.
- The competitor saturates a market segment, justifying your focus elsewhere.
- Weaknesses appear in the competitor's strategy, which provide opportunities for exploitation.

Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of your competition from an SEO perspective is a significant part of formulating your own SEO strategy. A final note on competitor analysis: be cautious when targeting competitor link strategies, as some of your competitors may be temporarily benefiting from link tactics that will get them penalized by the search engines (or they may already have been!).

SEO tools such as SEMRush and SearchMetrics can provide insight into your competitors' SEO performance.

SEO for Raw Traffic

Optimizing for search engines and creating thematically targeted content helps a site rank for key search queries, which typically leads to direct traffic, social sharing, and referral traffic from links as more and more people find, use, and enjoy the content you've produced. Thousands of sites on the Web leverage this traffic to serve advertising, directly monetizing the traffic sent from the engines. From banner ads to contextual services such as Google's AdSense, to affiliate and social media marketing, Internet advertising spending has become a massive industry. In October 2014, the Internet Advertising Bureau measured Internet advertising revenues for Q3 2014 at $12.4 billion, a 17% increase over Q4 2013.[1]

Here are some factors to think about when considering SEO for raw traffic:

When to employ SEO for raw traffic
> Use it when you can monetize traffic without actions or financial transactions taking place on your site (usually through advertising).

Keyword targeting
> Keyword targeting in this scenario can be very broad. The goal here isn't typically to select specific keywords, but rather to create high-quality content that naturally targets interesting, searched-for terms. Instead of singular optimization on specific terms, the focus is on accessibility and best practices throughout the site to earn traffic through both high-volume and long-tail queries (for more on what the *long tail* is, see Chapter 5). Concentrate efforts on great content, and use keyword-based optimization as a subsequent application to confirm the titles, headlines, filenames, metadata, and other elements of the content you create.

Page and content creation/optimization
> A shallow, highly crawlable link structure is critical to getting all of your content indexed—follow good information architecture practices (see "Creating an Optimal Information Architecture" on page 267) and use intelligent, detailed category and subcategory structures to get the most benefit out of your work. You'll also need to employ good on-page optimization in `<title>` tags, headlines, internal links, and so on, and make your articles easy to share and optimized for viral spreading (see "Root Domains, Subdomains, and Microsites" on page 285 and "Optimization of Domain Names/URLs" on page 292 for more on this topic).

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1 Interactive Advertising Bureau, "Q3 2014 Internet Advertising Revenues Hit $12.4 Billion, Making it the Highest Quarter on Record," December 18, 2014, *http://bit.ly/q3_2014_ad_revenues*.

SEO for Ecommerce Sales

One of the most direct monetization strategies for SEO is driving relevant traffic to an ecommerce shop to boost sales. Search traffic is among the highest quality traffic on the Web, primarily because a search user has expressed a specific interest through his query, and when this matches a service, product, or brand a website carries, conversion rates are often extremely high. Here are some factors to think about when considering SEO for ecommerce sales:

When to employ SEO for ecommerce sales
> Use it when you have products/services that are directly for sale on your website.

Keyword targeting
> PPC advertising is an excellent way to test the efficacy and potential ROI of keyword targets. Find those that have reasonable traffic and convert well, and pursue them further. You'll often find that the more specific the query is—brand-inclusive, product-inclusive, and so on—the more likely visitors are to make the purchase. The best use of this tactic is for generic terms that you will find harder to win on than brand/company named terms, so you can decide if they are worth the effort.

Quality content creation and optimization
> Your site will need to provide interesting, unique, and accessible content for both users and search engines in order to begin gaining traction in organic search. The links and social sharing that come from such content are highly influential in increasing overall site traffic, as well as improving organic search performance. Creating link-worthy, deeply engaging content should be the primary focus of any website seeking search and referral traffic, and should be incorporated into both the content development and SEO strategies. Manual link building is always an option, but scalable strategies that leverage a community or customers can be equally, or even more, valuable. Remember: content that keeps users on the page, instead of prompting them to click away rapidly, is a signal of quality and also serves to increase the value of traffic to the page (improving page monetization through advertising).

SEO for Mindshare and Branding

An equally powerful application of SEO is to use it for branding purposes. Bloggers, social media platforms, community websites, content producers, news outlets, and dozens of other web publishing outlets have found tremendous value in appearing atop the SERPs and using the resulting exposure to bolster their brand recognition and authority.

The process is fairly simple, much like the goal in traditional advertising of ad repetition to enter the buyer's consideration set. Online marketers have observed that being at the top of the search rankings around a particular subject has a positive impact on traffic, consideration, and perceived authority. A 2012 study by Conductor, Inc., highlights the significant branding value of a website appearing in organic search results.[2]

Here are some factors to think about when considering SEO for mindshare and branding:

When to employ SEO for mindshare/branding
　　Use it when branding or communicating a message is your goal.

Keyword targeting
　　A keyword focus is less critical here—you'll likely have a few broad terms that receive the high traffic you want, but the long tail may be far more achievable and the better target. Focus on keywords that are going to bring you visitors who are likely to be interested in and remember your brand.

Page and content creation/optimization
　　Make your site content easily crawlable by search engines, use intelligent linking structures to make the site intuitively navigable for users, and implement SEO best practices.

SEO for Lead Generation and Direct Marketing

Although online lead generation is less direct than an ecommerce transaction, it is arguably just as valuable and important for building customers, revenue, and long-term value. Millions of search queries have commercial intents that can't be (or currently aren't) fulfilled directly online. These can include searches for services such as legal consulting, contract construction, commercial loan requests, alternative energy providers, or virtually any service or product people source via the Internet.

Here are some factors to think about when considering SEO for lead generation and direct marketing:

When to employ SEO for lead generation and direct marketing
　　Use it for non-ecommerce products/services/goals that you want users to accomplish on your site, or for which you are hoping to attract inquiries and/or direct contact over the Web.

2　Nathan Safran, "Search Reimagined: The Branding Value of Page One," Conductor Blog, July 24, 2012, *http://bit.ly/search_reimagined*.

Keyword targeting
> As with ecommerce, choose phrases that have measurable traffic and have previously converted well in PPC campaigns. In a "considered sale" or enterprise-scale business decision for users, include long-tail keywords that might pertain to customer research activities or pain points, to educate and persuade via content. Avoid arcane jargon that isn't typically understood outside your company.

Page and content creation/optimization
> Although you might think it would be easier to rank high in the SERPs for lead-generation programs than for ecommerce, it is often equally challenging. You'll need a solid combination of content development and on-site optimization to be competitive in the more challenging arenas.

SEO for Reputation Management

Your name—whether personal or corporate—is your identity, so establishing and maintaining the reputation associated with that identity is generally of great interest.

Imagine that you search for your brand name in a search engine, and a prominent result is a web page that is highly critical of your organization.

SEO for reputation management involves, in part, the process for neutralizing negative mentions of your name in the SERPs. In this type of SEO project, you would strive to occupy additional spots in the top 10 results to push the critical listing lower, and hopefully off the first page.

SEO enables this process through both content creation and promotion via link development, as well as through optimization of content on third-party platforms, such as Pinterest, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Although reputation management is among the most challenging of SEO tasks (primarily because you are optimizing many results for a query rather than one), demand for these types of services is rising as more and more companies become aware of the issue.

Here are some factors to think about when considering SEO for reputation management:

When to employ SEO for reputation management
> Use it if you're trying to either protect your brand from negative results appearing on page one or push down already existing negative content.

Keyword targeting
> Chances are, this is very easy—the keyword you are targeting is a person's name, your brand name, or some common variant (and you already know what it is). You might want to use keyword research tools just to see whether there are popular variants you're missing.

Page and content creation/optimization

    Unlike the other SEO tactics, reputation management involves optimizing pages on many different domains to demote negative listings. This involves using social media profiles and other third-party platform pages, public relations, press releases, and links from networks of sites you might own or control, along with classic optimization of internal links and on-page elements. It is certainly among the most challenging of SEO practices, especially in Google, where the use of the *query deserves diversity* (QDD) algorithm can mean you have to work much harder because of how it favors diverse content.

    On the topic of negative search results in Google, in May 2014 the Luxembourg-based European Union Court of Justice ruled that people can ask Google to remove search results containing information about them, with the new, EU-specific "right to be forgotten."[3] While some view this as a victory for privacy laws, others view it as censorship. Time will tell how this plays out internationally and on a case-by-case basis for individuals.

SEO for Ideological Influence

For those seeking to sway public (or private) opinion about a particular topic, SEO can be a powerful tool. By promoting ideas and content within the search results for queries likely to be made by those seeking information about a specific topic, you can influence the perception of even very large groups. Politicians and political groups and individuals are the most likely employers of this tactic, but it can certainly be applied to any subject, from the theological to the technical or civic.

Some factors to consider when using SEO for ideological influence:

When to employ

    Use this tactic when you need to change minds or influence decisions/thinking around a subject—for example, a group of theoretical physicists attempting to get more of their peers to consider the possibility of alternative universes as a dark matter source.

Keyword targeting

    Generally in these types of campaigns, you probably know the primary keywords you're chasing and can use keyword research query expansion to find others. Consider inclusion of both "pro" and "con" phrases for maximum visibility in a debate. For example, *Obamacare* typically is considered a conservative or critical

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3 Reuters, "Europe's top court: people have right to be forgotten on Internet," May 13, 2014, *http://bit.ly/right_to_be_forgotten*.

label, while *Affordable Care Act* is the official label and is more commonly used by supporters.

Page and content creation/optimization

This is classic SEO, but with a twist. Because you're engaging in ideological warfare in the SERPs, chances are you've got allies you can rally to the cause. Leverage your combined links and content to espouse your philosophical preferences.

Advanced Methods for Planning and Evaluation

There are many methodologies for business planning. One of the better-known ones is the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis. There are also methodologies for ensuring that the plan objectives are the right type, such as the SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timelined) plan. We will take a look at both of these in the context of SEO.

SWOT Analysis

Sometimes you need to get back to the basics and carry out a simple evaluation of where you are in the marketplace, as well as where you would like to be; for this, a SWOT analysis is a great starting point. It creates a grid from which to work and is very simple to execute.

As you can see from the SWOT chart in Figure 3-3, strengths and weaknesses usually stem from internal (on-site, business operational, business resource) sources, whereas opportunities and threats are from external sources.

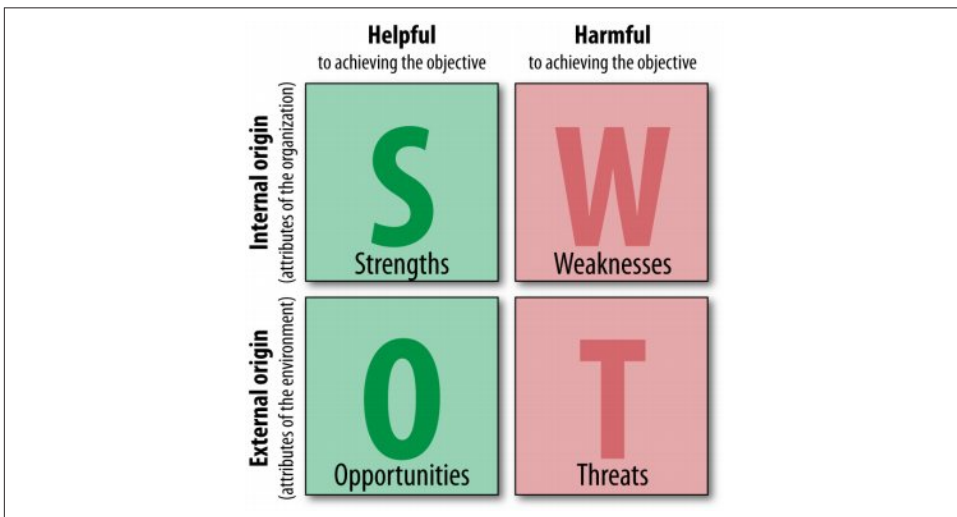**Figure 3-3.** *Example SWOT chart*

Where does SEO fit in here? To explore this, we'll use an example. Take Business X. It has a website that was built on WordPress, makes use of category tagging, adds at least one page of content every two days, and has excellent knowledge of its industry. Its domain name isn't ideal—*Businessnameandkeyword.com*—but it is decent.

Business X does not get much traffic from search engines, but its rival, Business Y, does because Business Y has had its website up for a long period of time and received some great links along the way. Business Y doesn't have any SEO plan and relies on its main page to bring in all of its search traffic. This is because Business Y has a keyword-rich domain name and people have used those keywords in their links to Business Y's website (giving it keyword-rich anchor text), and because of its longevity on the Web.

There aren't a lot of target search queries; in fact, there are fewer than 50,000 searches per month for the core set of keywords. Business X's site ranks on the second page of Google results, whereas Business Y is ranked #3, with Wikipedia and About.com taking up the top two positions.

Neither of the businesses is spending money on PPC (paid search) traffic, and the niche doesn't have much room for other entrants (there may be 10–15 competitors). Both sites have similar link authority in terms of strengths and numbers. The businesses deal in impulse purchases; the products evoke strong emotions.

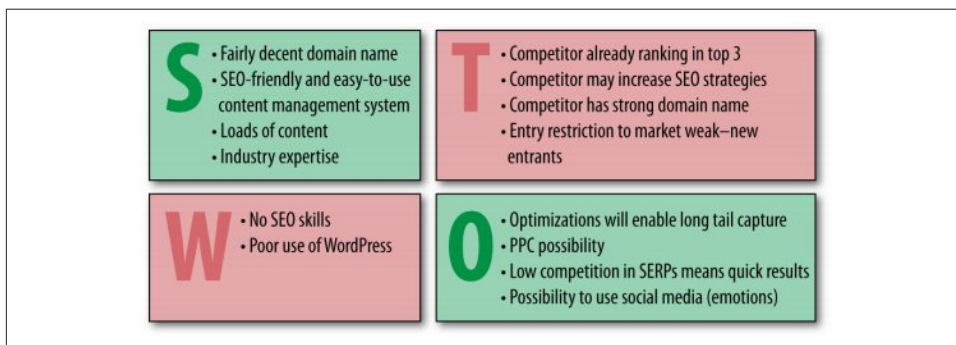Figure 3-4 shows what the SWOT for Business X might look like.

Figure 3-4. *Sample SWOT chart data for Business X*

The preceding analysis suggests where Business X can get some quick wins for its site, as well as where the priorities are. It also forms a great starting point for a long-term strategy and tactical maneuvers. This example is simplistic, but it illustrates how instructive a fleshed-out SWOT can be. It does require you to have analyzed your site, your main competitor(s), your target keywords, and the SERPs.

SWOT Guidelines

Identifying *strengths* is typically one of the easier objectives:

- What sources of traffic are working well (converting on established site goals) for your site/business?
- Which projects/properties/partnerships are driving positive momentum toward traffic/revenue goals?
- Which of your content sections/types produces high traffic, conversions, and ROI?
- What changes have you made historically that produced significant value?

Determining the *weaknesses* can be tougher (and requires emotional separation from the data):

- What content is currently driving low levels of search/visitor traffic?
- Which changes that were intended to produce positive results have shown little or no value?
- Which traffic sources are underperforming or underdelivering?
- What projects/properties/partnerships are being leveraged poorly, or not at all?

Parsing *opportunities* requires a combination of strength and weakness analysis. You want to find areas that are doing well but have room to expand, as well as those that have yet to be explored:

- What brainstormed but undeveloped or untested projects/ideas can have a significant, positive impact?
- What traffic sources currently sending good-quality traffic could be expanded to provide more value?
- What areas of weakness have direct paths to recovery?
- Which website changes have had positive results? Can these be applied more rigorously or to other areas for increased benefit?
- What new markets or new content areas are potentially viable or valuable for expansion?
- What sources of new content or new links have yet to be tapped?
- What third-party platforms (social media, content curators, etc.) can be utilized to expand reach and increase engagement?

Determining *threats* can be the most challenging of the tasks. You'll need to combine creative thinking with an honest assessment of your weaknesses and your competitors' strengths, and consider the possibilities of macro-events that could shape your website/company's future:

- In your areas of <u>weakness</u>, <u>which players in your market</u> (or other, similar markets) <u>are strong</u>? <u>How</u> have they accomplished this?

- What shifts in human behavior, web usage, or market conditions could dramatically impact your business/site? (For example, consider the "what if people stopped searching and instead navigated the Web in different ways?" perspective. It is a bit "pie in the sky," but we have already seen Craigslist make classifieds obsolete, and have witnessed Facebook start to take advertising market share from the search engines.)

- <u>Which</u> <u>competitors</u> have had the most <u>success</u> in your arena? <u>How</u> have they accomplished this? Where do they intersect with your business/customers?

- Are there any strategies implemented by startups in similar businesses that have had massive success in a particular arena that could be dangerous to your business if they were replicated in your market?

Conducting SWOT analysis from a web marketing and SEO perspective is certainly one of the most valuable first steps you can take as an organization poised to expend resources. If you haven't taken the time to analyze the landscape from these bird's-eye-view perspectives, you might end up like a great runner who's simply gone off the course—sure, you'll finish fast, but where will it take you?

SMART <mark>Objectives</mark>

Every <u>company is uniq</u>ue, so naturally its challenges are unique. Even a second SEO initiative within the same company will not be the same as the first. Your first SEO efforts will have changed things, creating new benchmarks, new expectations, and different objectives. Thus, each SEO effort is a new endeavor.

One way to start a new project is to set SMART objectives. Let's look at how to go about doing that in the world of SEO.

Specific <u>objectives are important.</u> It is easy to get caught up in the details of the plan and lose sight of the broader site objectives. You may think you want to rank #1 for this phrase or that, but in reality what you want is more granular than that: more leads, more page views, more customers. Perhaps you don't even need more customers from organic search, but you want higher sales volumes, so in fact having the same number of orders but with a higher average order value would meet your objectives better.

Measurable <u>objectives are essential if you are to manage the performance </u>in meeting them—you can't manage what you can't measure. SEO practitioners have to help their clients or organizations come to grips with analytics, and not just the analytics software, but the actual processes of how to gather the data, how to sort it, and most importantly, how to use it to make informed decisions.

Achievable objectives are ones that can be accomplished with the available resources. You could decide to put a man on Mars next year, for example, but it is just too big an undertaking to be feasible. You can be ambitious, but it is important to pick goals that can be met. You cannot possibly sell to more people than exist in your market. There are limits to markets, and at a certain point the only growth can come from opening new markets, or developing new products for the existing market.

Aside from basic business achievability, there are also limits to what can rank at #1 for a given search query. The search engines want the #1 result to be the one that offers the most value for users, and unless you are close to having the website that offers the most value to users, it may be unreasonable to expect to get to that position, or to maintain it if you succeed in getting there.

Realistic objectives are about context and resources. It may be perfectly achievable to meet a certain objective, but only with greater resources than may be presently available. Even a top ranking on the most competitive terms around is achievable for a relevant product, but it is a realistic goal only if the resources required for such an effort are available.

Timelined objectives are the final part of the SMART methodology. If there is no timeline, no project can ever fail, because it can't run out of time. SEO generally tends to take longer to implement and gather momentum than a paid search advertising campaign. It is important that you set milestones and deadlines so that you can manage expectations and course-correct.

"We want to rank at #1 for loans" is not a SMART objective. It doesn't identify the specific reason why the company thinks a #1 ranking will help it. It doesn't have a timeline, so there is no way to fail. It doesn't state an engine on which to be #1, so there's a guaranteed argument if the intention is to rank well on both Google and Bing, but the result is only high rankings on Bing.

"We want to increase approved loan applications generated by organic search by 30% over six months" is a far better objective. There is a deadline, and the company can certainly gauge progress toward the specific objective. The company can look at its current market share and the resources committed to see whether this is an achievable and realistic goal.

Conclusion

To bring this all together successfully, your objectives, strategies, and tactics need to be aligned, and they need to take into account your market, your business, and the competition. Don't spread yourself too thin. Remember to ask yourself the tough questions, such as: