

POLARIS

Q4 SEO Strategy

Learn how to increase Ecommerce market share
and win new customers through SEO in 2024



Outline	03
About Us	03
Preface	04
What is an organic search strategy?	04
What does an effective strategy look like for 2024?	06
AI	06
TikTok	07
Get your Christmas SEO Strategy right from the beginning	11
SEO Market Share: What percentage of SEO traffic have you got	13
Tools to help you evaluate SEO competitors	14
Evaluating last year's SEO performance	19
Training & Development	21
Data & Analytics	27
The Reporting Analysis Maturity Framework	32
The changing SERP	33
Automation through AI (not ChatGPT)	36
How to direct content production	38
Challenges for Brands in 2024	39

Outline

About Us

POLARIS is a leading SEO agency that guides *Ecommerce* and *B2B* organisations on how to increase market share, online. Our approach to SEO focuses on user profiling, channel optimisation, and enhancing customer experience's. By bringing these capabilities to the heart of our SEO campaigns, we drive an average return of 720% within the first year of engagement for our clients.

Our clients

Dune
LONDON

 THOMSON REUTERS


Marie
Curie

MARS


hampers.com
bringing joy to gifting

BLITZ

 中國銀行
BANK OF CHINA


sodexo

BATEAUX
LONDON

Purpose of this guide

This guide is aimed at: performance marketers and digital marketers of retail and fashion brands responsible for marketing ecommerce websites.

The purpose of this guide is to make marketers question their approach to increasing market share in highly competitive product categories through SEO.

Preface

The leadership team at POLARIS have been operating SEO campaigns for over 20 years. We have been around long enough to see the transition from simple SEO techniques when search engines were in their infancy to today where only the most considered, multi faceted strategies succeed.

As an agency skilled in delivering performance through SEO, we care about search engine compliance matters.

Our internal processes are driven using a specific process we follow that we want to share with ecommerce stakeholders. This guide has been produced to share our expertise and enrich your approach to ecommerce SEO.



What is an organic search strategy?

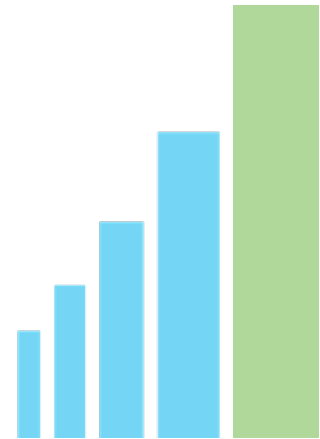
An organic search strategy is a data led, customer focused approach that a business plans in order to increase its digital exposure within search engines online.

An organic search strategy encompasses not only SEO tactics and plans, but also:

- / Customer targeting and profiling
- / Situation analysis and product / service mapping
- / Customer journey analysis
- / Content marketing strategy
- / Digital PR & Outreach strategy
- / Onsite User Experience
- / Data & Analytics

Typical goals and objectives to aim for within an Ecommerce SEO strategy:

Typical goals within an organic SEO strategy usually revolve around increasing rankings in a search engine and traffic as a result. However, this high-level goal requires further detail in order to ensure a strategy is designed that is relevant to the target business.



1. Customer profiling must be carried out to determine who we want to target and what they need to progress with on their journey to find a solution.

When it comes to understanding your customers, we need to conduct various types of analysis to determine who our customers are and what drives them to buy from us. Marketers can start by looking at first party data collected in analytics tools within the business. You can also survey your customers, asking them about their experience, what led them to purchase, and what made them transact with your brand. Marketers can also marry first party data with third party databases such as Experian to build a more complete set of customer profiles. Once complete, “pen portraits” can then be created that mimic typical customers by their demographics and behaviours, giving marketing a clear picture to aim marcom campaigns at.

2. Where do your target customers reside online?

Whilst organic search is considered largely with search engines, your target customers will exist elsewhere online, such as social apps and sites, and media websites. By understanding where these pockets of traffic exist, you can consider how to target relevant content in a relevant format to still penetrate those customers through a more consistent campaign, online.

3. Competitor analysis is required to validate your strategy and ensure your investing into a strategy that will provide the right results in months to come.

By analysing a competitor’s exposure in search engines, and their digital profile online you will be able to determine if your competitors who have the same target customer also position themselves in the same online locations. You’ll also be able to reverse engineer aspects of what is working well for your competitors and what is not, creating a benchmark report that you can then critique your own current performance against and review as you progress on your organic search journey.

What does an effective strategy look like for 2024?

In 2023 marketers were impacted by 2 significant areas with regards to organic search that carry forward into 2024 and must be considered as a part of any SEO strategy.

AI

AI tools such as Chat GPT launched in 2023, giving marketers excitement and hope around how it could be utilised to produce content in a faster, easier way. As the reality set in after lots of tests and trials, the industry unofficially confirmed that AI will not put content writers out of jobs, and that the application of AI is more likely better suited to improving efficiency and ways of working by autonomising aspects of marketing administration that's otherwise costly in time, effort, and brain power.

What is the role of AI in the organic search equation?

Thinking about the role of AI in search, there are a number of areas that AI must be considered across.





With over 1.1 billion users ranging from 13 to 60 in over 160 countries, TikTok has dominated our lives in the last few years. With such a strong presence, the social video sharing platform has not only created a new way of engaging with Video content, but it is now starting to rival the likes of Google and Microsoft when it comes to helping users find information online.

A recent study conducted by Adobe found that “64% of Gen Z’s and 49% of Millennial’s saying they’ve used TikTok as a search engine.”¹

The platform is most commonly used amongst Gen Z’s to search for information however even Baby Boomers find the platform useful.

Search topics that the platform performs well for currently include food and restaurants, fashion tips and advice, and home décor and DIY.

Based on initial search behaviour on the platform, it could be that TikTok’s core essence of offering personalised video from real humans adds an authenticity to reviews that a search engine such as Google cannot offer right now in the form of a flat blue link or web page result.

That said, TikTok is causing a shift in search behaviour in:

- / Where consumers search online
- / How consumers search online

This is a consideration for advertisers in 2024 that must be met depending on your products and services and target consumer profiles.



¹ <https://www.adobe.com/express/learn/blog/using-tiktok-as-a-search-engine>

Strategic points to consider in 2024 to make the most of your organic search strategy

1. Understand how to use Google Analytics 4 more effectively for insights
2. Re-evaluate your customers search behaviour, because its constantly changing
3. Understand the differences between Google and TikTok as search destinations that influence and how they apply to your business
4. Learn how to apply AI within your business to improve your approach to Organic Search and SEO performance
5. Learn how to adopt SEO internally amongst various stakeholders to increase value from their existing day to day output





Q4 holds the biggest opportunity in the calendar year for most ecommerce brands. But with SEO being such a long burn, careful planning and project management is key.

For the majority of businesses selling online, the last months of the calendar year from October to December offer the biggest opportunity for online sales and customer growth online.

From Black Friday to Christmas, there are multiple opportunities that retailers have to generate sales and make digital drive more performance. But in order to maximise the opportunities that Q4 offers your retail business, when should you start thinking about commencing with your SEO strategy?

How SEO can fuel a retail strategy in Q4

Because consumers no longer sit online and complete purchases in a single session, attribution modelling is becoming far more the norm than ever before. A retail brand must consider how all channels work cohesively together to ensure that users are targeted and presented with an opportunity from your brand to continue ahead on their desired journey to purchase, ideally with your business if it continues to serve their needs and intent.

“A recent Nielsen meta-analysis of consumer packaged goods (CPG) campaigns found that full-funnel strategies see up to 45% higher return on investment (ROI) and 7% increases in offline sales compared to marketing campaigns across a single purchase stage .”²

SEO offers brands the ability to introduce products, explain products, and sell products to consumers at various stages of the sales funnel.

² <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/en-emea/consumer-insights/consumer-journey/full-funnel-marketing-strategy/>

Interestingly, SEO has the ability to position a brand across many stages of the sales funnel. In a report released by Think with Google defining what we now know as “The messy middle”, we can see that the phases of exploration, and evaluation comprise of the messy middle where consumers go through awareness and consideration of products and services, and also your brand. Through SEO, you have the opportunity to expose your products through a variety of forms, including:

 Look books

 Style guides

 Buyers guides

 Video content

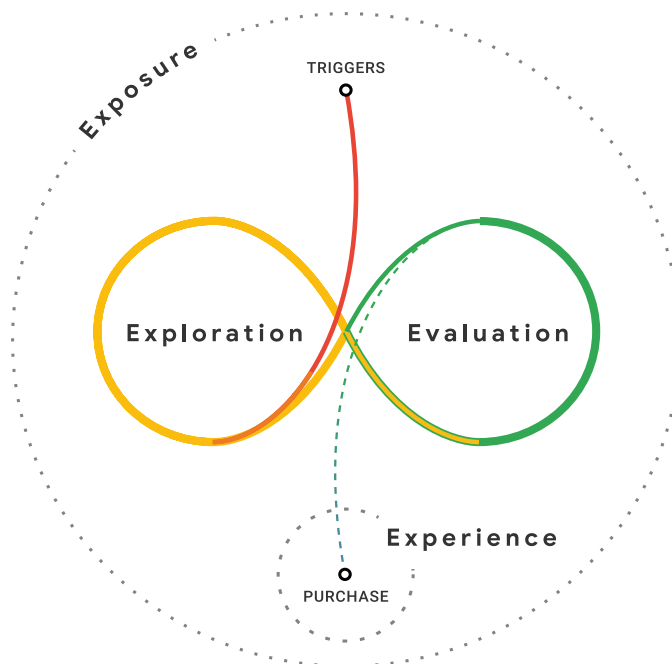


Figure 1 - <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/en-emea/consumer-insights/consumer-journey/navigating-purchase-behavior-and-decision-making/>

On this basis, ecommerce brands need to evaluate the current strengths and weaknesses the brand is experiencing from an SEO point of view and determine how an SEO initiative can be organised to drive a clear return on investment. This requires learning and careful analysis. Even with a mature team in place, a year on year analysis would be required at a minimum and require several weeks of analysis.



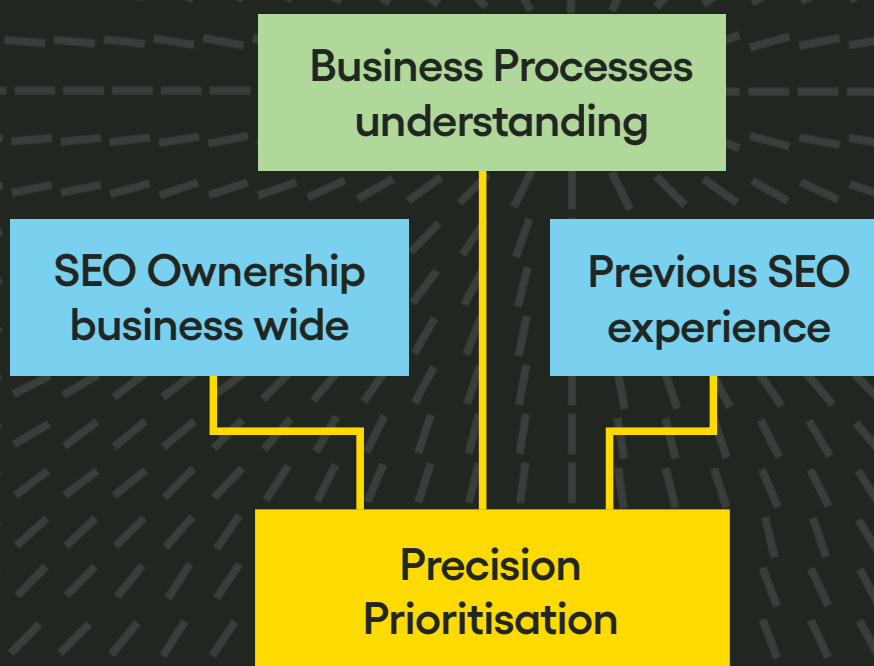
With the sheer variety of opportunity that SEO offers a retail brand, and the ever changing landscape and significant analysis demands the channel requires, retail and ecommerce brands must initiate an SEO strategy at least 6 months prior to any target period of impact.

Larger brands need to carefully project manage SEO initiatives otherwise you will set yourself up to fail

The larger the brand, and the more stakeholders, and departments involved, the less an online retailer may be able to achieve within a specified timeframe. Not only do brands have to plan months in advance, a brand also needs to have an excellent ability to project manage and prioritise SEO opportunities to go after.



Prioritising SEO opportunities requires a solid understanding of the way your business functions, the ability to own and direct SEO actions as priority over other business requests, and the experience and knowhow to know what will work.



Brands with internal SEO teams will have project managers integrated within their structure, however being able to independently represent SEO across a number of departments and stakeholders is always challenging.

This is where external advisors such as an SEO agency can be of significant value within the process.

Get your Christmas SEO Strategy right from the beginning. **Start your strategy in Q2.**

If drafted in at the right time, i.e. within January to May, then the SEO agency will be able to support the internal marketing function with an expert pair of eyes that can evaluate the current activity and then protect the interests of the channel company wide.

By taking on ownership, and representing SEO to all departments and stakeholders, SEO is given the precedent it requires to have impact that drives an increase in rankings, traffic, and online sales.

We have to prepare 4 months ahead of consumer demand to gain sales from Google



Opportunity Analysis

1

- Website
- Google
- Competitors



Website Updates

2

- Categories
- Salesforce
- Editorials



Time for Google to update

3

- Google crawling the website

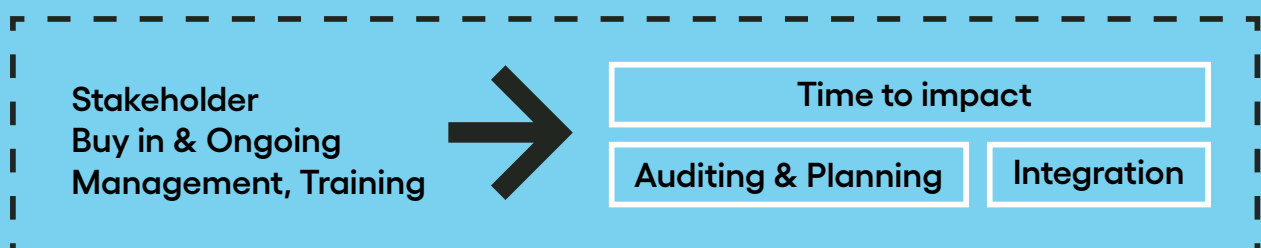


Customer demand

4

- Customers start searching in Google

If SEO opportunities are not efficiently prioritised, a brand risks spending valuable time and resource chasing opportunities that cannot be realised due to technical constraint or (more likely) company wide stake holder buy in within a suitable enough timeframe to impact SEO performance.



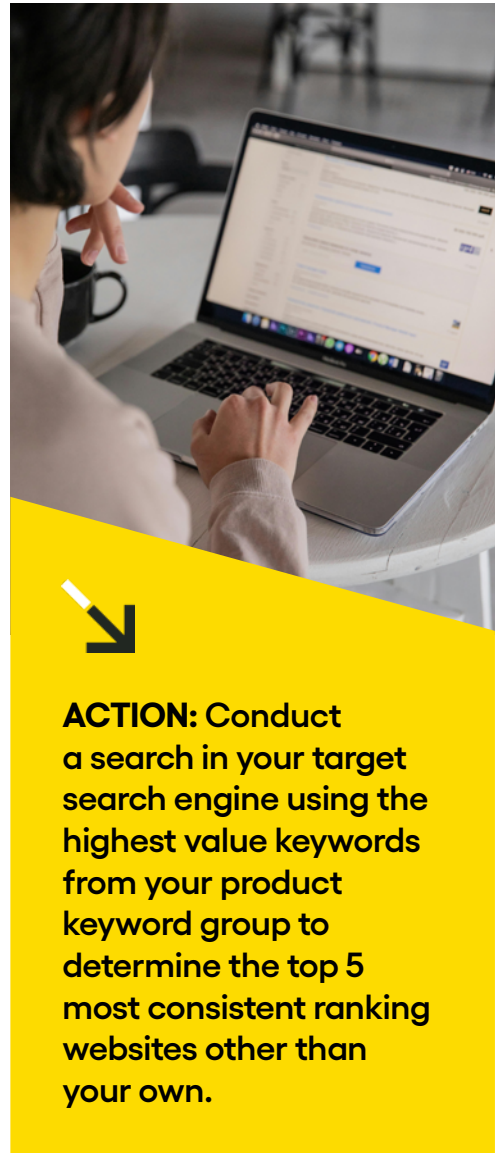
SEO Market share: What percentage of SEO traffic have you got?

Brands must analyse the search landscape to determine how much market share you have against your competitors.

The bigger your brand the more consistent your search engine results pages (SERPs) competitors will be. The top positions typically are dominated by the largest retailers, and if your one of them, you will know that maintaining this consistent exposure is key in receiving traffic from the SERPs.

But how do you evaluate your organic competitors? How do we even determine who our competitors are? Depending on the scale of your product categories, your business might span far and wide, from homeware to childrenswear. If this is the case, other ecommerce websites that you compete against for children's terms will not be the same you will compete against for pillowcases and bed linen (unless it's another department store for example such as House of Fraser or John Lewis).

What we therefore want to do in the first instance is determine which product categories we need to identify competitors for, and then evaluate those competitors for that specific product category.



ACTION: Conduct a search in your target search engine using the highest value keywords from your product keyword group to determine the top 5 most consistent ranking websites other than your own.

These 5 websites will be your category competitors to evaluate.

Once you have identified these competitors, there are a number of actions you can take to monitor their performance against your own:

- 1. Track their rankings in a rank tracking software**
- 2. Evaluate their competing landing pages against your own for on page tactics**
- 3. Evaluate their backlink profile to determine what their approach is to PR**
- 4. Evaluate their serp listing and reverse engineer their SEO success**
- 5. Use a tool to determine how much market share they have against you**

The primary purpose of a landscape audit is to take learnings from competing brands that outrank you so that you can apply them to your own strategy and then compete more effectively to increase market share.

Tools to help you evaluate SEO competitors

There are a number of tools that you can use to gain competitive insights from an SEO perspective. Different tools offer different insights and varying degrees of detail. Typical SEO tools will provide you with SEO insights related to:



Keyword positions /overlaps /gaps



Backlinks and domain authority



Estimated traffic levels



Keyword research around trends

The following SEO tools offering a variety of competitive insights that would support an organic strategy being informed.



SEMRush SEMRUSH

Brief description: “Sem rush is the online visibility management and content marketing SaaS platform.”

What is this tool?

/ SEMRush offers an all-in-one tool suite which can help digital marketers with various insights. This SEO tool offers help with the following marketing services: SEO, PPC, Keyword research, Competitor research, PR, Content Marketing and Campaign Management

Who is it aimed at?

/ SEMrush’s tool is aimed at marketers of any specialty.

What are its benefits?

- / By using SEMrush’s tools, you are able to identify trends that occur within an industry niche.
- / SEMrush can help you optimise your pages and improve your on-page SEO through its onsite audits.
- / SEMrush can also help you identify target keywords for your SEO campaign.

What are the features it offers for competitive analysis or competitive auditing?

- / **Traffic analysis:** Allows you to benchmark your website traffic against competitors to understand where you stand in terms of organic traffic. This tool allows you to view a competitors total traffic, top traffic sources, bounce rate and time on page.
- / **Organic research:** Learn about your organic search competitors and discover opportunities to compete against them. Learn about the value of the keywords that a competitor is ranking for.

AHREFs ahrefs

What is this tool?

/ AHREFs is an SEO software that offers tools for link building, keyword research, competitor analysis, rank tracking and site audits. All tools inside of the software is designed for marketing professionals.

Who is it aimed at?

/ AHREFs is aimed at marketing professionals that are looking to improve their site SEO in order to rank higher within the SERPs.

What are its benefits?

/ AHREFs specialised in analysing a websites link profile.

What are the features it offers for competitive analysis or competitive auditing?

- / Content gaps: Able to find content gaps between you and your competitors and discover new content ideas.
- / See where your competitors get their backlinks.
- / Monitor your organic share of voice.



What is this tool?

- / SpyFu is an SEO and PPC tool that uses web scraping technology to gather its data.
- / This tool is widely used by marketing professionals to improve their online search performance through the use of keyword research and competitor analysis.

Who is it aimed at?

- / This tool is aimed at marketing professionals that wish to improve their online search performance.

What are its benefits?

- / SpyFu is fast and reliable.

What are the features it offers for competitive analysis or competitive auditing?

- / **PPC competitor analysis:** Spy on competitor ads, campaign history, spend and their most profitable keywords.
- / **SEO & rank tracking:** Target the keywords driving traffic to competitors
- / **Keyword research:** Plan campaigns seamlessly with UK and US data
- / **Backlink outreach:** Steal the competitions backlinks and manage outreach.

Recommended by Neil Patel.

Serpstat

What is this tool?

/ Serpstat is an all-in-one SEO platform that helps a marketer analyse competitors and conduct keyword research for SEO and Google ads.

Who is it aimed at?

/ Serpstat is aimed at SEO and PPC professionals

What are its benefits?

- / Complete SEO ranking tool
- / Affordable
- / Easy to use

What are the features it offers for competitive analysis or competitive auditing?

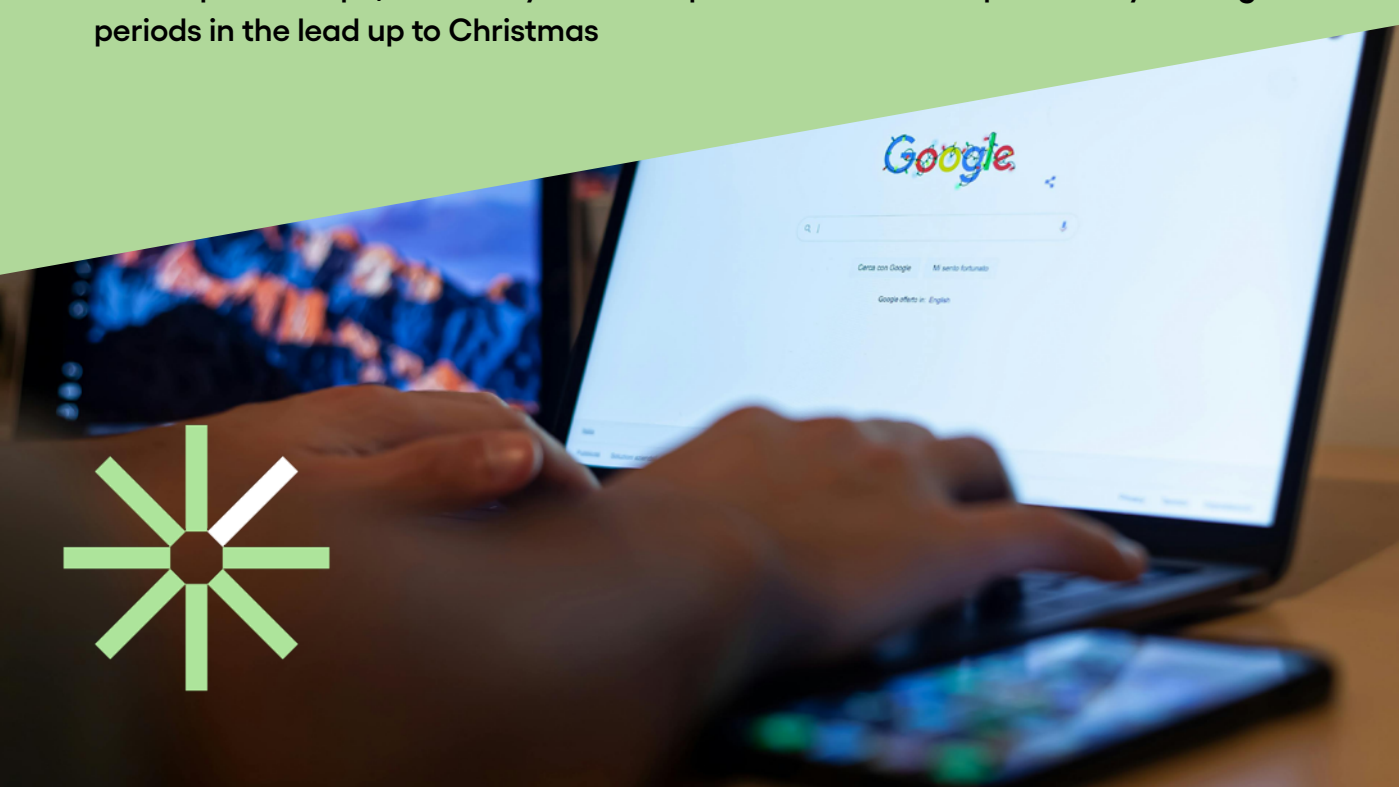
- / SEO competitive analysis
- / Find all competitor keywords in organic search
- / Track the growth of competitors
- / Detailed domain comparison

Evaluating last year's SEO performance to take learnings forward this Christmas and Q4.

A key part of the competitive analysis equation is to analyse what occurred in the previous year. A typical Q4 or Christmas SEO strategy will require a year on year analysis of your own brands performance but also looking at what worked well for your competitors will help shape your approach for the upcoming year ahead.

Key insights you can gather by looking at YoY data include

- / Search trends and consumer demand YoY (declines and increases in demand for product)
- / Product sales and category sales that performed well / not so well
- / A market share analysis of organic traffic and sales per product category
- / The serp landscape, and how your brand performed in the serps over key trading periods in the lead up to Christmas



A case in point: Hampers.com, how POLAR/S drove an increase in sales and SEO market share 3 years in a row for the online gifting retailer

POLARIS partnered with Hampers.com to guide the gifting business on how to maximise sales during their biggest trading period of Christmas. Having experience of the Christmas gifting landscape for the previous 3 years, the team at POLARIS were aware of the key process required to dominate the SERPS and maximise revenue from customers looking to gift hampers.

POLARIS advised the gifting company that the organic results become more and more volatile as we get closer to Christmas Day, with rankings for all competing sites fluctuating based on a series of factors.

8 weeks out from Christmas, the client was advised that fresh content onsite, plus PR would be critical to continue to provide regular signals to search engines to keep the brand ranking as high as possible within the SERPS.

Targeting high volume queries such as “hampers” and “gift hampers” the client was provided a content strategy that focused on buying intent, providing them with inspiration on what's in demand, in trend, and selling well.

Coupling this with PR activity to promote the brand across partner sites, meant that the gifting company ranked in the top 3 positions consistently, competing against M&S and Fortnum and Mason.



Many aspects of this strategy to dominate the Christmas SERPS was derived from analysing activity conducted by brands in the previous year, applying them to the gifting companies strategy.

YOY Traffic increase
137%[▲]

Q4 traffic increase
105%[▲]

Market share increased by
15%[▲]

Training and Development: Educating your internal teams to understand how SEO fits into the day to day

Meet your biggest SEO blocker – a lack of SEO understanding amongst your teams

The most significant challenges marketers face in driving SEO performance is always down to a lack of SEO knowledge and alignment across functions. Because search engine compliance demands that brands tick SEO boxes right from code bases to offsite backlinks, SEO demand goes far and wide across the business.

If we consider the three pillars of SEO, we can see what typical blockers look like for ecommerce brands looking to increase market share.



Tech SEO

- / Website CMS / platform not able to accommodate SEO needs
- / Developers disengaged with SEO as its “hard work”
- / SEO requests conflicting with other requests and due to lack of understanding are low priority
- / SEO requests integrated badly, or not at all



Onpage SEO

- / Page templates not designed with SEO in mind
- / Pre built CMS logic restricting application of programmatic SEO rules
- / Convoluted information architectures which confuse users and crawlers
- / Complete lack of internal link strategies connecting clusters to pillar pages



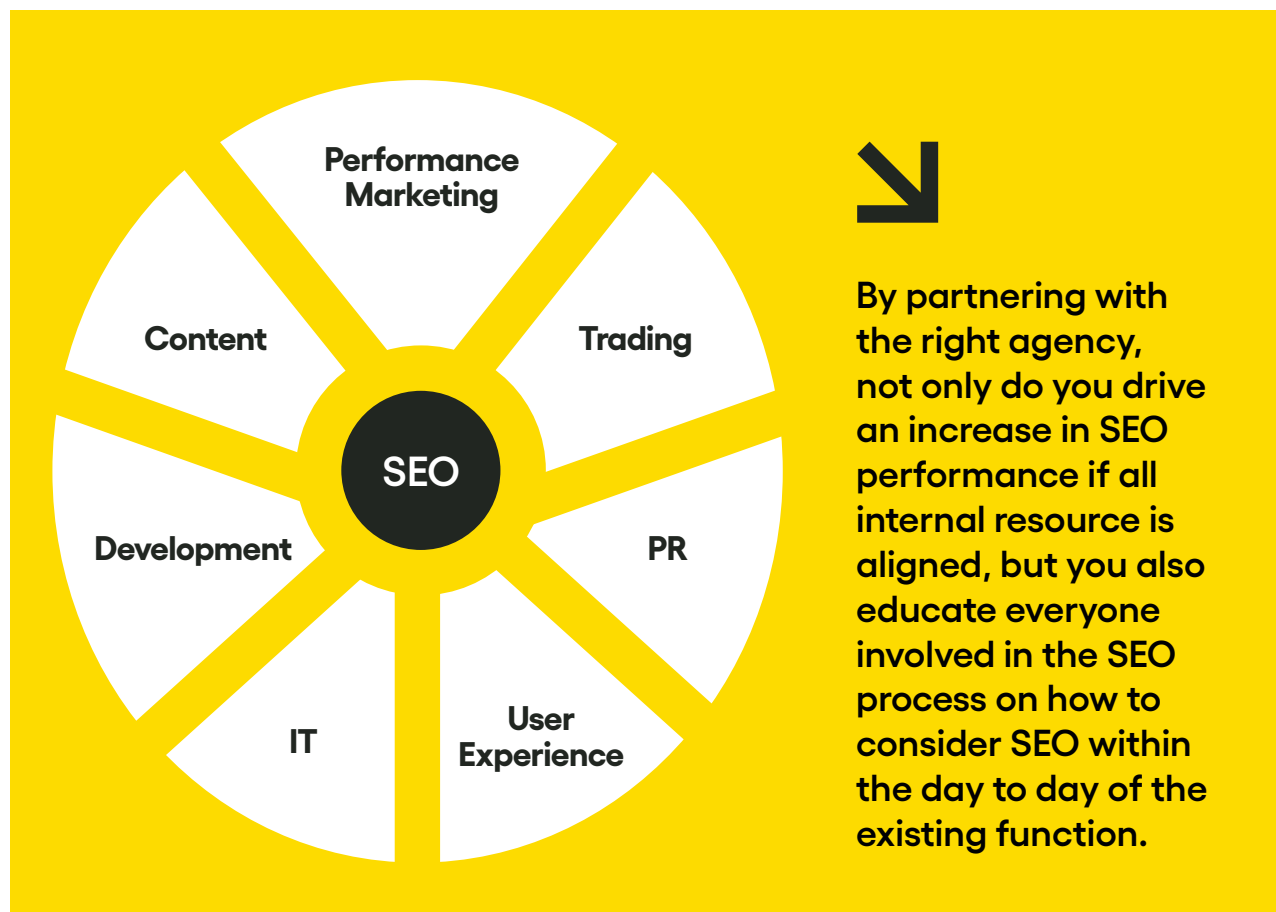
Digital PR & Outreach

- / Low quality outreach to disreputable websites
- / Lack of internal awareness of the purpose of digital PR for SEO
- / Business wide buy in on the value of product outreach for SEO
- / Lack of collaboration between content teams and PR teams on outreach for SEO

The challenge that all brands face, particularly those without an internal SEO team, is that SEO as a marketing channel affects multiple areas of the business, and SEO as a subject matter is understood hardly at all.

To overcome this, brands and marketing stakeholders must find an SEO trainer that can come in and help internal teams across Marketing, Content, Development, IT, PR, and even UX to upskill themselves in the subject of SEO and how its considered within their remits.

The alternative to this is working with an SEO agency that has the ability to direct the SEO strategy within the brand, across all required teams, whilst nurturing and training stakeholders as a strategy is executed.



Breaking down SEO barriers: Getting IT and Development stakeholders and teams onside

SEO activity is not something you can dial up and down like other direct response channels around seasonal campaigns. Organic performance is strongly aligned to a consistent “always on” approach and as such requires a consistent all year round effort.

This work transcends SEO and as identified at the start of the guide you need to look back at your previous years multi-channel performance to assess channel effectiveness, along with sales quantity, volume, price point of highest sales and to gain an understanding of where within the sales funnel the channel activates the customer awareness to conversion.

If you are working with an SEO agency or have an internal SEO team, you will know that the work completed by the SEO team is multi-faceted and contains everything from:

- / Editorial content,
- / Optimisation of the core high-traffic/buyer demand landing pages,
- / Digital PR,
- / Wireframes,
- / Merchandising within product listing pages (PLPs)
- / Refining the product detail page optimisation.

These are tasks largely placed with the marketing team working in collaboration with the SEO team.

The tactics above are pretty general and usually don't require too many stakeholders, or investment outside of the marketing/ecommerce/brand content team. The above tasks can also be done pre-phase and amended slightly before the event to tweak further based on feedback/optimisation opportunities (continuous optimisation) driving a higher return on output for marketing over time however, it doesn't matter how great your digital PR coverage, on-page content and editorial are if your technical SEO is not on point.



If your website cannot be crawled efficiently; has a broken ecommerce checkout journey on certain devices, or is using filter pages for high demand pages, then SEO performance will be technically limited.

The challenge that internal SEO and marketing stakeholders have is that in the first instance SEO opportunities need to be audited, evaluated, validated and then put into schedule before any code freezes.

Without an expert technical SEO stakeholder, it is often challenging to determine the priority and impact of requests against each other. This is the first hurdle to overcome in getting IT and Dev stakeholders onside with your SEO strategy.

Marketing stakeholders must be fully informed in the prioritisation of all technical SEO requests and their potential impact in order to represent and explain the requests within scope planning meetings with dev teams.

Scope planning meetings are the first opportunity for SEO stakeholders to present and discuss technical requests. This is the time where SEOs must explain the impact potential of requests to communicate the reasoning behind the request.

Developers will push-back on items where they do not see a simple solution because their priority is to protect code bases and work with a code first view. In many instances, creating work arounds and hacking code can lead to issues and challenges that also require debugging, and fixing, and so developers have a natural reaction to protect the existing solution as best as possible.

This is a buy-in challenge and one you need to address early on in the journey to have a progressive relationship between all parties aligned around website performance.

Without being able to clearly justify the rationale for technical requests and then comfortably challenge developers when they push back you will not achieve parity which leads to success.

By considering the following areas, SEO stakeholders can build healthy productive relationships with IT & Development to drive SEO impact through technical optimisation.

Fair-process:

Through developing a fair process approach this ensures the successful roll-out of the SEO strategy into technical execution. Key within the process is to build knowledge sharing, transparency, and inclusion through engaging all the parties affected. Explain the business reason for proposing the technical requests and share performance potential so that IT / Devs understand the upside potential in real world numbers.

Share documents, data, competitor insights and live screen share webpage walkthroughs so everyone can see the experience.

Getting team on side:

An addition to the above especially in new engagements it is key to build the relationship between all parties. Often the developer and marketing team will be used to working with each other, the SEO stakeholder is introduced later on. Take the time to understand each other; explain what you are planning to do and get the developers to feedback on current sprint list/backlog as they know the site capabilities a lot better than you. Take the time to understand any challenges they have faced in the past when considering SEO, and let them share any questions and concerns they have. Then make it clear how much SEO counts towards upcoming performance targets, and how the business is deeply vested into making the channel work.

Know your role and function and stick to it:

Its essential to remember to stick to your skills and your remit within the equation. Technical SEO's understand basic code/programming frameworks and developers understand foundation level SEO. However, neither are experts in these fields. Do not try and advise on the other parties role and expert area and, never estimate time/effort on delivery from the other side. This approach creates "eye-rolls" and can be the foundational layers of a bad working relationship in the future. Trust each other, give consideration but be firm in your SEO pursuits.

Build sprint requirements together, always:

After any workshop it is imperative that tasks are clearly documented for progression. It is essential that the SEO team write the first draft of these, defining the purpose, business goals, assumptions, team involvement and acceptance criteria to ensure everything is understood by all parties. A lot of times one of the common challenges even after the workshop phase is that there are still misinterpretations of tasks as developers will focus on functional aspects whilst SEO teams focus on performance. The requirements document must detail everything and should be reviewed by the developers who can then add their criteria so all is shared/understood by all parties before the sprint starts.



To ensure ultimate buy in from IT and Dev teams, share the wins. They only know what you have all achieved if you tell them.

Often developers are not aware of channel performance. Make sure your developer partners are aware that what was done within the Sprint has aided performance. This increases trust over time as developers can see first-hand the results achieved through onsite performance, rankings, traffic and sales that the combined effort and cooperation has achieved.

Also, remember to focus on supporting the developers and building capabilities to enhance future performance rather than raising problems. Developers appreciate insights and guidance that comes from marketing or SEO to help focus on creating solutions, not more problems.



Work with development teams to keep to code freezes and protect Q4 peak trading by planning well ahead.

In relation to Q4 performance some brands have a complicated sprint process – especially if not ringfenced and sitewide areas being worked on not just specifically SEO. With peak code-freeze around October for Christmas any technical work should be completed 3 months prior to that date so any large-scale SEO technical changes should be scoped in now for deployment in June/July for UAT testing and regression work as if there are any issues (which there often are) you will have 3 months to fix before peak.

You don't want to make any significant template, global rule automation, checkout or architecture/categorisation changes close to peak as this can be disastrous for Q4 trading. The risk is simply too high.

Data and analytics; does your tech stack give you the intel you need to accurately assess SEO performance

Essential with ecommerce and omnichannel brands is having an awareness of your website performance. A key activity post campaign is “looking back” to ask questions such as:

- 1.** How did we perform through Q4? Is this better or worse than the previous year?
- 2.** What were our highest selling products during the event/s?
- 3.** Did our core landing pages convert/perform at the level expected?
- 4.** Where did SEO benefit the sales process the most?
- 5.** Was mobile performing better than desktop? If so why?
- 6.** Did our content perform through the stages of the customer journey as we intended?
- 7.** Were our rankings in target search engines stable? Did we rank better or worse than the previous year?

Analysing SEO performance requires a tech stack that connects multiple data points to provide customer behaviour insights but in the majority of cases it is firmly embedded in the field of ecommerce analytics that are at best filtered by channel to determine basic level insights.





A true Ecommerce analytics solution involves gathering data from multiple platforms including your online store to review/analyse to inform business decisions over time, based on customer intent, onsite behaviour, and purchase trends.

Through the understanding of this data you are able to review the marketing funnel – from acquisition through awareness, discovery, conversion, retention and advocacy.

The results of getting this right can aid the website performance through:

- / Increase in web sales,
- / Enhanced engagement metrics,
- / Better customer experience,
- / Lower cart abandonment
- / A higher channel ROI.

When it comes to a channel performance overview such as one through SEO, the main solution integrated by most Ecommerce businesses is Google Analytics 4, Adobe, and Google Analytics 360. Some brands use their CRM/CMS analytics but usually this is as a secondary measure with the Google/Adobe properties used more frequently.

Some brands also use Google Search Console (GSC) and potentially one third-party SEO tool however the SEO tool is seldom understood with insights being more technical than commercial.

Most marketers know how to use GA4 and are able to make simple segmentation (filtered) dashboards to look at key channel data performance.

However, even with Google Analytics there is more you can get out from the platform especially to monitor organic performance not just sessions and conversions.

Many professionals within the SEO industry believe that user experience data collected by search engines is used inform search engine results pages.

Marketers and SEO stakeholders must focus on always answering user intent and understanding a users intent when planning SEO and onsite strategies.

The data and analytics tech stack you need to gain a full SEO view of your business

SEO stakeholders will have a plethora of tools to analyse various data points regarding your websites SEO performance.

From page speed to server performance, there is no end to the volume of technical insights that SEO teams consider when auditing performance.

But what data and analytics tools do marketers need to assess channel performance? What does a minimum viable tech stack look like to give you what you need on a day to day basis?

The following 3 areas showcase the elements that are recommended for an ecommerce brand that needs a data and analytics solution for fuelling SEO growth.



User Data

/ Website Analytics
/ User Experience



SEO Data

/ Rank Tracking
/ Competitor
/ Tracking



Transactional Data

/ CRM
/ Big Data Tool



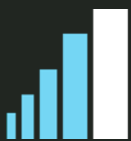
Combining the data from these tools allows for a set of intelligence that can drive SEO opportunity forward.

This is how you get the true SEO channel performance with this holistic view and are able to model assumptions to further test practices and evaluate different approaches.

Most marketing teams (even SEO agencies) report on observations and do not delve deeper into the motivation behind why this is happening. As a typical activity, viewing an organic top landing page performance report and seeing traffic is down on the previous year is simply a 2D view. You need to build a more complete rounded picture, assessing:

- / Previous years performance**
- / Page engagement and journeys**
- / Server issues and performance**
- / Product range performance**
- / Competitor price point**
- / Page speed across devices**
- / Ranking terms driving traffic**

With so many data points it can be tricky where to start.



Data visualisation through a series of dashboards using a range of tables and graphs is critical to being able to absorb intelligence in easy, meaningful way.

The building of these dashboards is crucial to reporting up to stakeholders. Understanding where SEO exists within online journeys is essential to optimise the website to maintain a competitive advantage in highly competitive sectors.

With the right intelligence, a brand can increase their SEO performance and traffic for long tail keywords within 12 weeks, just with on page and technical SEO enhancements.

Is your marketing function mature enough to analyse SEO performance

Data can be daunting. Particularly if it's not already been processed to be output within an easily understood format using visualisations such as graphs and charts. Marketers need to be able to comfortably absorb data and make data led decisions that drive Organic strategies.

Typical points to analyse through data include:



Search engine performance including:

- / Impressions
- / Rankings
- / Result types
- / Competitors
- / Market share



Attribution model including:

- / Source channel driving first click
- / Most profitable channel mix
- / Customer acquisition costs per channel / overall



Onsite performance including

- / Top performing landing pages
- / What PLPs had the highest conversions
- / What PDPs had the highest conversions

The challenge most marketers face always starts with the data being collected. Many brands have an analytics solution that lacks integrity, as implementations are constantly being refined and adapted for various reasons such as compliance (GDPR for example) and business needs.

This means that its difficult to look back and compare a years performance against a previous year as the data sets are not consistent.



An analytics maturity scale is needed to guide brands on what a foundation level solution looks like at minimum adoption through to advanced for enterprise level solutions.

The Reporting Analysis Maturity Framework aims to cover all the current high-impact tracking techniques that based on level of skill/understanding should be integrated into your reporting suite to be able to carry out look-back analysis effectively outside of basic dimensions and metrics.

The Reporting Analysis Maturity Framework

01



Foundation

- / Set up GA4 correctly (data streams)
- / Check events/conversions are tracking
- / Ensure you have all the reports you need to monitor
- / Create a Looker studio dashboard using GA4/GSC API

02



Build

- / Create custom reports (from reporting option)
- / Implement SST (essential for paid media)
- / Create enhanced tracking (for third-party cookie removal)
- / Edit reports to emulate UA
- / Create customised GTM/Datalayer tracking events (micro and macro)
- / Ensure all API/Listener events and CRM tracking is setup correctly
- / Develop free flow customised reporting
- / Enhance your Looker studio dashboard using third-party APIs and custom CRM data (Phase 1)

02



Enhance

- / Develop custom metrics and dimensions from parameter data
- / Integrate OCT into your paid reports
- / Profit tracking through third-party APIs
- / Use customer behaviour insight data through integrations
- / Using Explorations to build segments and audiences
- / Use GA4 ML capabilities for conversion and prediction modelling
- / Export GA4 into BigQuery
- / Use Zapier to automate GA/third-party data into Teams/Slack
- / Enhance your Looker studio dashboard using data warehousing, blends, third-party APIs and custom CRM data (Phase 2)



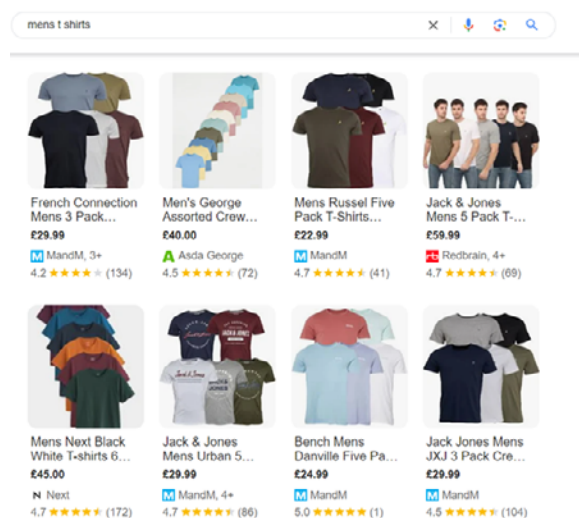
To progress from the foundation level solution to the more advanced requires being able to track and trace performance from cradle to grave; which in SEO terms is being able to track which search query generated the first click which then in turn drove a conversion.

To achieve this level of sophistication requires awareness on all SEO metrics and to have a deep reporting suite that provides pro-active opportunities that can be enveloped into an ongoing Organic search strategy.

The changing SERP and what this means for brands looking to capitalise on SEO traffic in 2024

Search is changing and has been evolving throughout 2022/23. The Search Engine Results Page (SERP) are now constantly evolving, as Google continues to run tests based on location, personalisation and queries.

In 2022 Google carried out 80,000 experiments that resulted in 4,000 improvements to search. They also carried out 894,660 search quality tests and 148,038 interleaved side by side tests with quality search raters.



This data is fed back into the machine learning algorithm as data points.

The change to the SERPs has been accelerated based on the development of OpenAI and Microsoft's collaboration with OpenAI. Google is known to see OpenAI as a threat and although as a company Google is far more advanced with AI/ML than Microsoft Google didn't see this coming, which prompted the 2023 "code red meeting" within Google's top rank management team. Since then Google has tried to keep up with product launches including (Bard), Gemini (the prototype launch video lacked authenticity) and SGE (currently tested in 120 countries but unlikely to roll out in UK and EU). These releases have been rolled out in a rapid succession and will likely not be used for the entire SERP either. Based on testing so far, these result types will compliment the existing core SERP offering an alternative experience, indicating that Google still may be unsure as to the best route forward.

Google has also recently released organic product listing ads (PLAs), another result type to now include with the SERP for relevant product queries.



It is safe to say Google is in a state of flux.

The impact on the Google SERP by contenders such as TikTok

TikTok is a major rising contender for content discovery and certain demographic segments are using it as a search engine, which aligns with the Chinese brands marketing message “it starts on TikTok” and app development with a search function becoming the primary navigation mechanic.

Search data is starting to be shared by TikTok (e.g the recent insights and creator insights areas) that reports search queries people are typing into the platform are sales funnel based problems - solutions and as the platform with its new shop area becomes more monetised for retail brands who target specific demographic segments in 2024/25 it remains an area for R&D monitoring and testing.

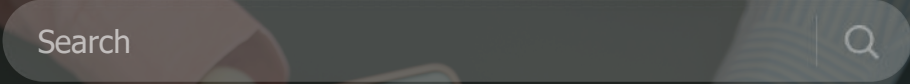
TikTok is now starting to monetise its traffic, by introducing a new shop area and increasing ad spend from advertisers taking to the platform. The platform is now offering consumers an alternative environment to search for information and serve their intent online, which for some queries and interests is proving to be a richer, more dynamic, and immersive experience that a SERP page currently offers.

However, as much buzz as there is around TikTok as a search engine it really only serves creative content in a short form format, targets very specific terms (think YouTube 2006) and is creator-led (when it becomes brand it loses its authenticity).

Whilst TikTok is commanding the attention of marketers worldwide, its ambition to compete with Google as a search engine still has some way to go.



TikTok's video format works well for certain topics and interests such as food, music, and travel, but other topics it may not offer as much value, for example B2B products and services.



The most common searches conducted on the TikTok platform

With queries such as:

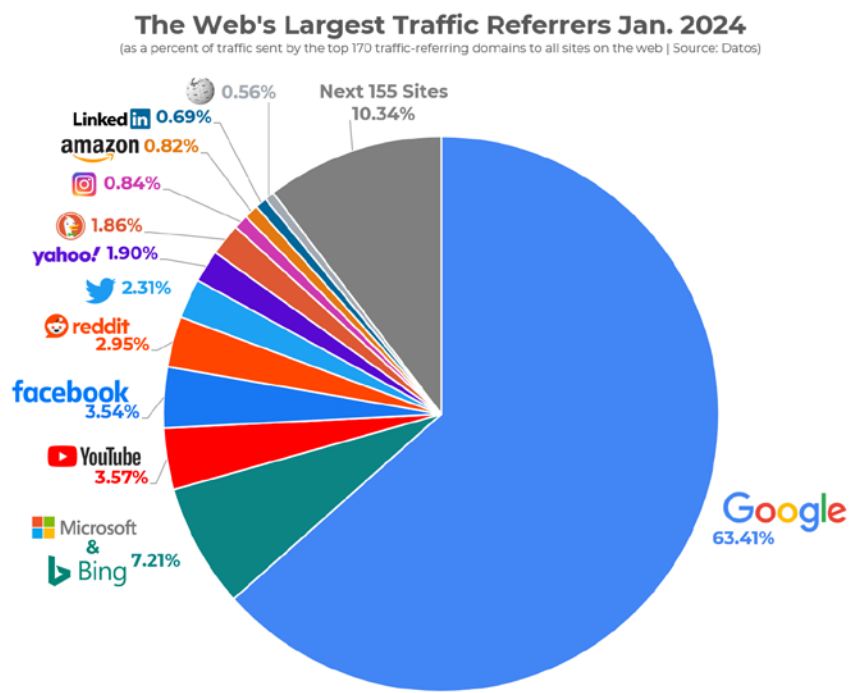
- / Roblox
- / Song
- / NBA
- / Netflix
- / Barclays Premier League
- / ASMR
- / Shein
- / Minecraft
- / Cricket
- / Music

- / Make up tutorials
- / Cooking recipes
- / DIY
- / Fashion
- / Fitness

From the following graph, we can see that even for these topics and subjects search volumes are still significantly higher on YouTube.

We therefore have to consider a users intent, and how this may change when they visit a SERP such as Google or exist inside an app such as TikTok.

In a recent study it was found that Google is still responsible for nearly 70% of all web traffic referral. YouTube is 3.57% TikTok is not currently listed.



** Sites with a single owner that pass referrals via multiple entities have been grouped (e.g. Twitter.com, Twimg.com, and T.co; Live.com, Bing.com, MicrosoftOnline.com, Office.com, and Office365.com; etc.)

Automation through AI (not ChatGPT)

Marketing automation is not new, however AI is now part of the marketing vocabulary, with many content creators and brands using AI to create short-cuts to scale out content quickly.

AI gets a bad rap, it is simply a technological development that people abuse because everyone wants to “increase productivity” without having to think. Marketers have become lazy.

AI content systems such as ChatGPT have been around for some time with many existing in the SEO sector – scraping websites feeding this data into an ML language model so the tool can learn how to better optimise the page. This is something that used to cost around £100 per month but after ChatGPT this tool does it better and far cheaper.

The recent algorithm update as part of the webspam team aims to eliminate “low quality” scale out content such as ChatGPT outputs. Like I say, marketers have become lazy – most just copy and paste the output from ChatGPT and spend ages being clever building complicated prompts.

Google is not dull. In 2014, Google acquired DeepMind a UK based AI research laboratory to further develop their deep learning capabilities. In 2015, they created AlphaGo an algorithm to beat an 18-times world champion in the game Go a simple game in concept but generally regarded as more difficult than chess due to the size of the board and the possible configurations a player can make. It has been stated that there are more possible board configurations in Go than there are atoms in the universe. Since then there have been further developments in the AlphaGo model.

Google have gone on record stating that they use deep-learning models from around 2015 within their search algorithms to aid information retrieval and provide most times the top 20 pages in the SERPs.

Therefore, it would be naïve to believe (as many SEO's do on social media) that Google wouldn't be able to spot AI content without even trying that hard. In fact, although these tools are basic a free AI pattern detector can with relative ease spot AI content.

In fact, forget that an SEO practitioner can easily spot AI content as there are certain words, phrase structures and NLP factors that are so plain to see that it wouldn't take Google long to build a script into their algorithm to find these.

Also don't forget ChatGPT is trained on the same basic language model as Google was many years ago. Google is smart, has its own data and has approx. 10 years gain on OpenAI.

There is a general statement used within data science “if a human expert can spot the pattern it is generally not worth the effort or time for data science to “discover”.

Machine learning algorithms exist to assess large data-sets to discover complex patterns undetectable by the human eye.

All Google would have to do is a) feed in human rater signals checking suspected AI content or b) create thousands of prompts into OpenAI to pull the outputs into a ML dataset for it to run through multiple programmes to define a common sentence structure and common words not used that commonly within its corpus of billions of sites.

For example, if a word “craft” is not used that frequently outside its parent topic sector “crafting, making something” and used on B2B sites in a less frequency than the baseline then Google could easily test the assumption that this term is more AI than natural.

Recent sites penalised by the webspam team as below had the following patterns:

- / 100% published AI content
- / 90% use of AI generated articles within copy
- / Sites promoted through social showing AI content being used
- / Use of ad content
- / Multiple low quality programmatic pages (non-AI but pattern based)
- / New sites, low DA having thousands of pages in a short-time frame
- / Sites created using expired domains for ranking purpose only

So best to stay away from unnatural site scale out and unhelpful content.

How can AI help marketers in 2024/25:

- / **ChatGPT, Claude, etc.** can be used for research and feeding datasets into the engine to prompt specific results
- / **Perplexity** – citations and higher quality source data
- / **Content AI tools** – checking coverage of terms based on sector/topic
- / **Image AI** – no more use of stock imagery
- / **Video editing** – ideal for social, content marketing and podcasts
- / **Python scripts** – automation of SEO tasks (plus build your own tools so you know “exactly what is in there”)
- / **Sora** – create videos from text new product from OpenAI
- / **Zapier** – automate data inputs into your email/internal messaging channels (Teams/ Slack) or build datasets based on filtered records to integrate into project management/ CRM/marketing reports

How to direct content production (onsite SEO)

Directing content production and editorial to fuel an onsite SEO strategy takes diligence and a commercial sense of SEO expertise. The challenge that many brands face is that producing editorial around product and styles doesn't necessarily equate to an increase in exposure, as content produced is not produced with SEO intelligence in mind.



“The majority of ecommerce editorials published are created without customer targeting in mind and are published within a technical framework that prohibits crawlability and indexation.”

– James Foote, Technical Director, POLARIS

The first challenge – aligning content teams with SEO stakeholders so that content is produced with SEO in mind.

Big brands face challenge when SEO experts do not sit directly inside the business. When this is the case, there is no internal SEO stakeholder that can connect with Content owners and producers to ensure collaboration and consideration of targeting.

Introducing an SEO stakeholder into the equation is also not enough on its own. A business needs an SEO stakeholder that has a strong voice and can command content teams to upskill themselves to understand SEO and then apply SEO tactics when producing content.

Educating content teams on how to optimise content is the first step. Content managers need to understand what the purpose of targeting is and how content can be crafted to fit both the business' need to promote product but also marketing's need to connect with target audiences.

Once educated and enlightened on the nuances of applying SEO tactics to content production, the value of content being produced increases tenfold, giving content managers an increased sense of satisfaction and business' a higher rate of return from what is essentially the same output.



Content Planning

- / Customer profiling
- / Keyword research
- / Competitive analysis
- / SERP landscape analysis



Content Production

- / Content SEO principles
- / Internal linking
- / Readability and format
- / Topical analysis



Content Optimisation

- / URL optimisation
- / Onsite SEO principles
- / Linking and architecture
- / User experience
(mobile in particular)

Most commonly experienced challenges for brands in 2024



Lack of Cohesion

How to overcome this:

Working with a dedicated partner that owns SEO for the business, across all departments. Implementing and project managing multiple sub projects across Content, Technical and PR to bring everyone together.



Knowledge Gaps Internally

How to overcome this:

Getting all stakeholders across all departments aligned through education on the subject of SEO and how it fits into the day to day.



Ownership Over Technology

How to overcome this:

Understanding the capability and constraints of the existing tech stack and having an SEO partner that can speak the same language as your IT/ Dev to prioritise tasks and sprints more effectively.

Useful resources

- / [Dune London – Increasing market share through SEO for the high street brand](#)
- / [Ecommerce SEO Campaigns](#)
- / [Ecommerce Analytics Solutions](#)

Contacts for further guidance



Amo Sokhi

Account Director

amo.sokhi@polarisagency.com



Mat Downs

Business Director

mat.downs@polarisagency.com



Emily North

Business Coordinator

emily.north@polarisagency.com