Searching for SEO Balance

Balance

bal·ance

about 1,900,000,000 results (0.82 seconds)

verb

Perfecting SEO is more balancing act than a prescribed set of actions. It is a blend of considerations where you'll continually make trade-offs and decisions. Done correctly, SEO entices a visit, offers content ideal visitors find relevant, delivers a desirable user experience, and ultimately ==leads to an action you want a user to take.== Getting all of this to happen isn't easy.

WHAT MATTERS MOST IN SEO?

Panda. Penguin. BERT. Mobilegeddon. If you're a B2B marketer, you've probably heard these famous names and reacted with some level of trepidation. That's because every time Google updates its algorithm — and gives it a cute name — the search engine optimization (SEO) gymnastics begin. The SEO blogosphere erupts with gurus scrambling to unravel the mysteries of the update so they can begin advising clients on what fixes they'll need to employ next to keep them at the top of the rankings.

For more than a decade, much of the SEO industry has been trapped in an insidious cycle of keeping up with Google and its algorithms. But what many have failed to realize is that success in search engines no longer relies upon — and frankly, never did — the continuous analyses of algorithm changes and subsequent gaming to succeed online. John Mueller, senior webmaster trends analyst for Google, made this abundantly clear in 2017 when he described the key factor for achieving a top ranking in search results in a single word: "awesomeness."

That concept of awesomeness is where successful SEO starts and ends. It's the idea that SEO is part of a holistic marketing strategy that only begins with being visible in a search result. Done correctly, SEO also entices a visit, offers content ideal visitors find relevant, delivers a desirable user experience, and ultimately leads to an action we want a customer to take.

Getting all of this to happen isn't easy. Like all things B2B marketing, SEO is a blend of considerations where you'll continually make trade-offs and decisions, i.e., a balancing act.

Before we get to the factors you'll need to consider, let's define some basic principles.

WHAT IS SEO?

One of the most popular search engine websites (Search Engine Land) offers this definition of SEO: the process of improving your site to increase its visibility for relevant searches.

It's a classic definition that many accept, but it's too limited. Definitions like this lead to SEO being treated as an isolated discipline focused on the search engine results page, disconnected from a business' overarching marketing strategy.

As B2B marketers, we need to look at SEO differently: first, as an important, but not isolated, digital channel in your integrated B2B marketing program through which to tell your story; second, as a multifaceted discipline that goes beyond rankings.

WHY SEO?

The exact percentage varies by source, but somewhere between 60 and 90% of B2B decision makers start their research with a generic internet search. So, our obsession with SEO is well-founded.

It's one of the most effective means of:

» Reaching lots of people: We've all come to rely on search engines to help us solve our problems, both personal and professional.

» Reaching the right people: If done correctly, you're getting in front of people who are telling you exactly what they need, exactly when they need it.
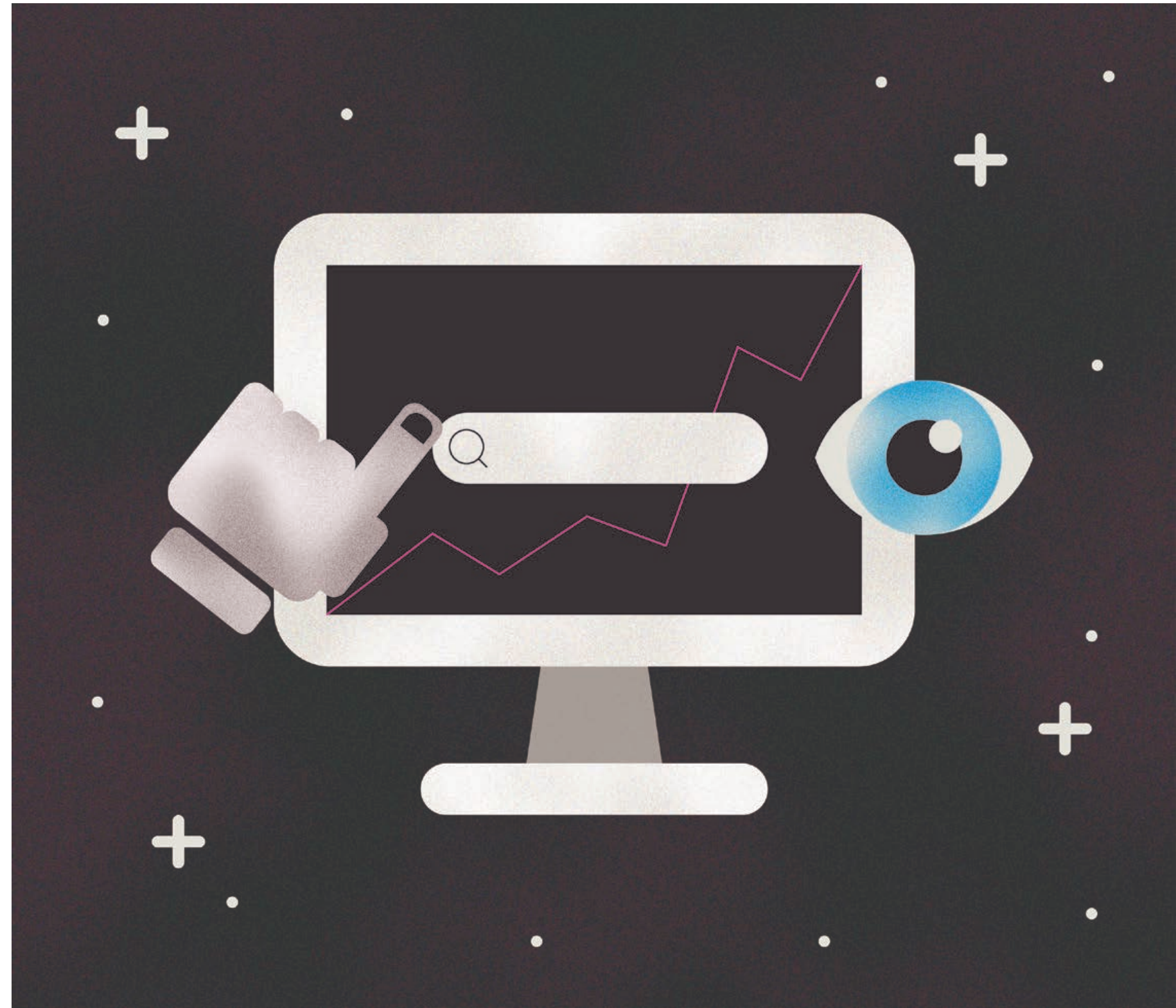
BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR SEO SUCCESS

Connecting your business with customers through searches on engines like Google is a multilayered process that requires knowledge of how search engines work AND a sound understanding of B2B decision making.

It starts with:

» **Pinpointing the types of searches that are most likely to indicate a user is a potential customer.**

   › Sometimes users are really explicit in what they're looking for:

      › "innovative IoT solutions for monitoring warehouse systems"

   › At other times, they're vaguer, using queries that are potentially unrelated:

      › "labor management"

   › Where do we focus our efforts and ensure we're not only hitting the right users but also reaching enough users to make the effort worthwhile? Think of it as a balance between precision and volume. The more precise the keyword or phrase, the less the volume. The vaguer the keyword or phrase, the less likely they are to engage or make a purchase.

It culminates with:

» **Ensuring the website experience is awesome and solves the problems of the users we attract.**

   › Website content must speak to the needs a user has expressed through their search phrases. Otherwise, what's the point? And along with great content, the user experience — from content flow to ease of use — must be top notch. This not only makes it more likely a visitor will engage and take action, but it also ensures your brand is viewed as trustworthy.
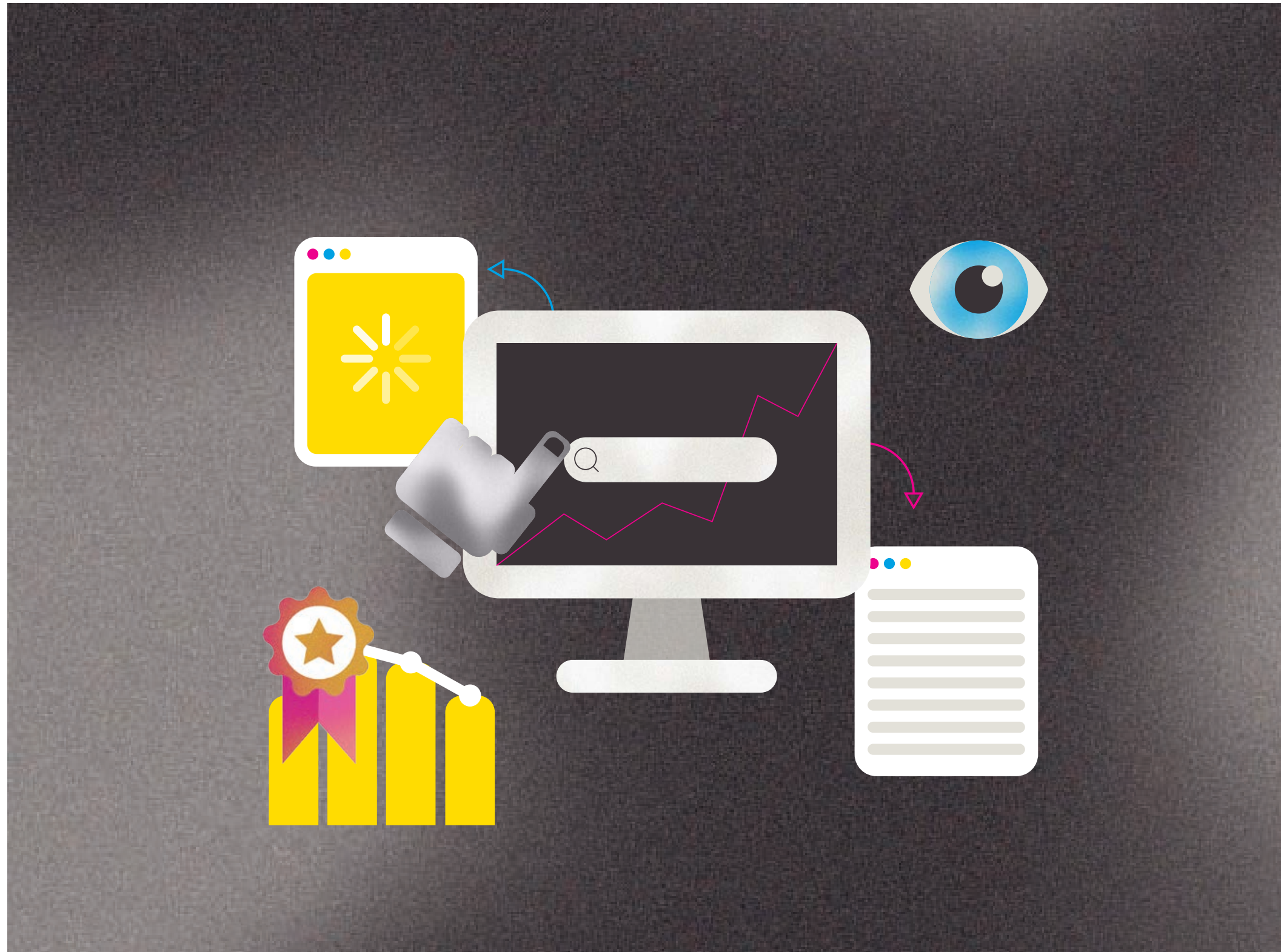
THE MECHANISMS OF SEO

There are hundreds of levers we can pull on a website to improve SEO. Some are simple; some are complex. Broadly speaking, the options can be broken down into the following categories:

» Content

» Tagging

» Website performance

» Reputability

» Search engine results page representation

» User experience

CONTENT
Still King of the Internet

You've heard the adage "content is king" in digital marketing. This really can't be understated. SEO programs are unlikely to thrive without awesome content in place. But how do we know if that content is "SEO-ready"?

Historically, this was done with some basic metrics: keyword repetition (how many times a keyword appears), word count (how many words in total are on the page) and keyword density (how many times the keyword appears, divided by your word count). Many SEO firms still rely on these metrics to guide clients, which usually leads to the butchering of what otherwise may have been great content.

Today's game is considerably more nuanced. Keywords still have their role, but that role has fundamentally shifted to one of gentle guidance instead of forceful repetition. Keywords can and should still be incorporated in a page's HTML elements and copy, but that must be tactfully and tastefully executed. Google is much more willing to rank webpages that read naturally and offer compelling, authoritative content than webpages that repeat a keyword a dozen times or has over 1,500 words on it.

Fortunately, SEO marketers are not totally in the dark in analytically determining when a page is in good shape. Tools like Google's Natural Language Processing Tool give us a bird's eye view of what they think your page is about. If you're happy with how Google interprets a page, no more keywords are needed!
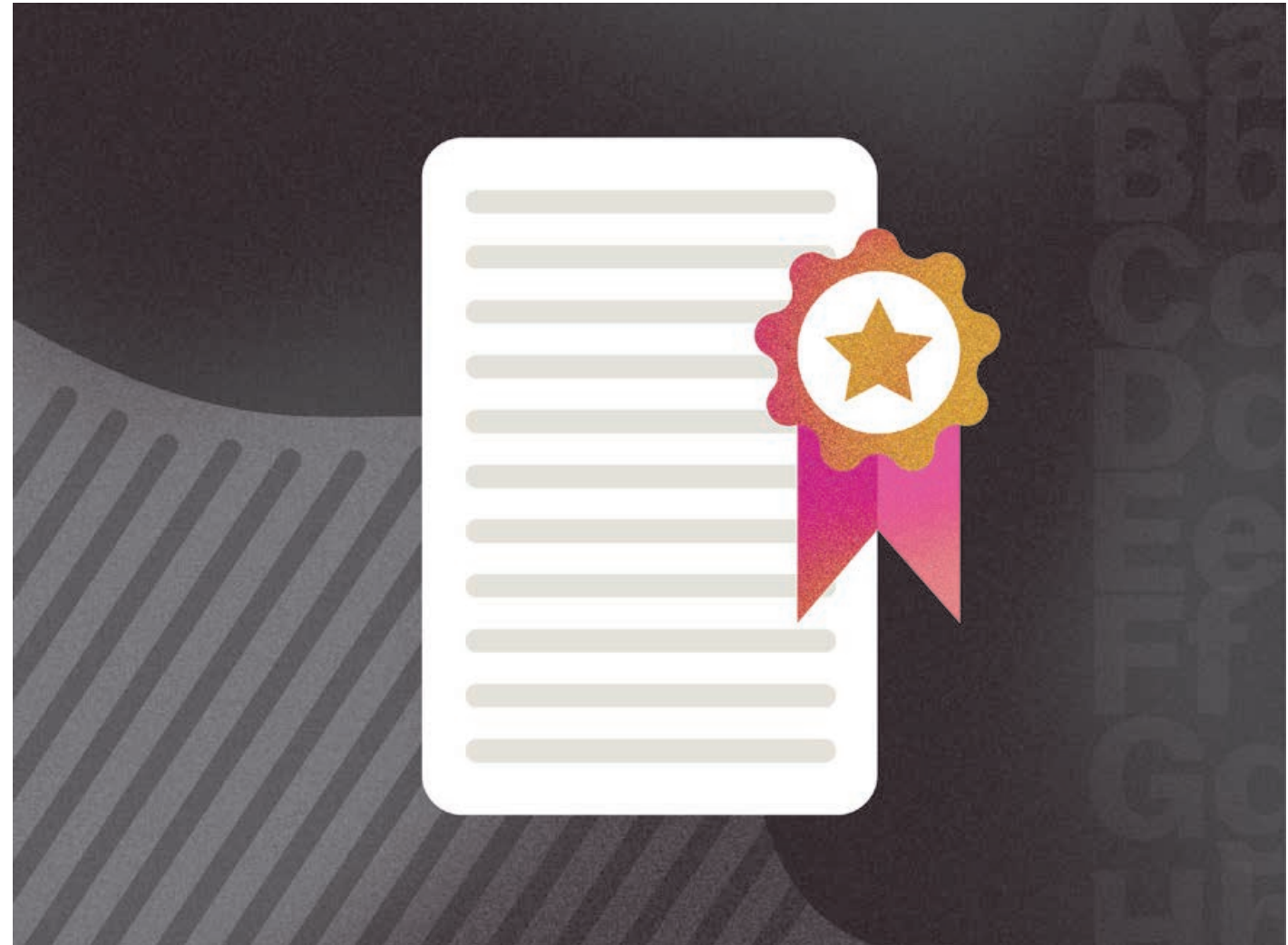
Keywords can also help to identify content gaps in a website. Is a subject inadequately detailed or perhaps not represented at all? Keyword research can provide a compelling case for creating additional content on subjects you otherwise would be missing out on. This can be especially beneficial if you have a healthy blog regimen. Speaking of which, routine publishing of content is another perk in SEO, and when informed by keyword research, can pay dividends in a website's SEO performance.
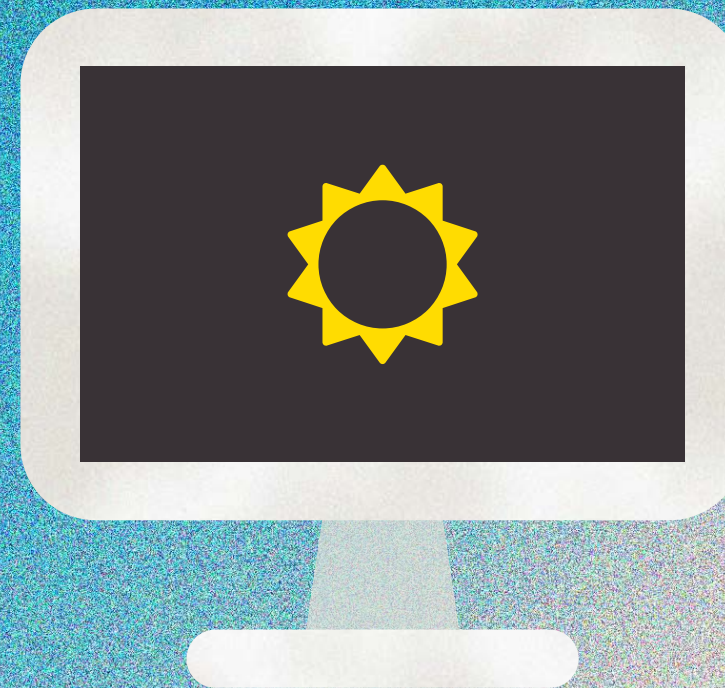
TAGGING
Think Like a Librarian

Think of your webpages like books. They should contain well-organized clues (i.e., "tags") that make it easy for a librarian (i.e., Google) to catalog that information in its Dewey Decimal System. (i.e., Google's multi-trillion webpage "index").

The following HTML elements make it much easier for Google to do its job as a librarian and also make it easier for users to choose your book — instead of the potentially million other books competing for your attention on the same shelf.
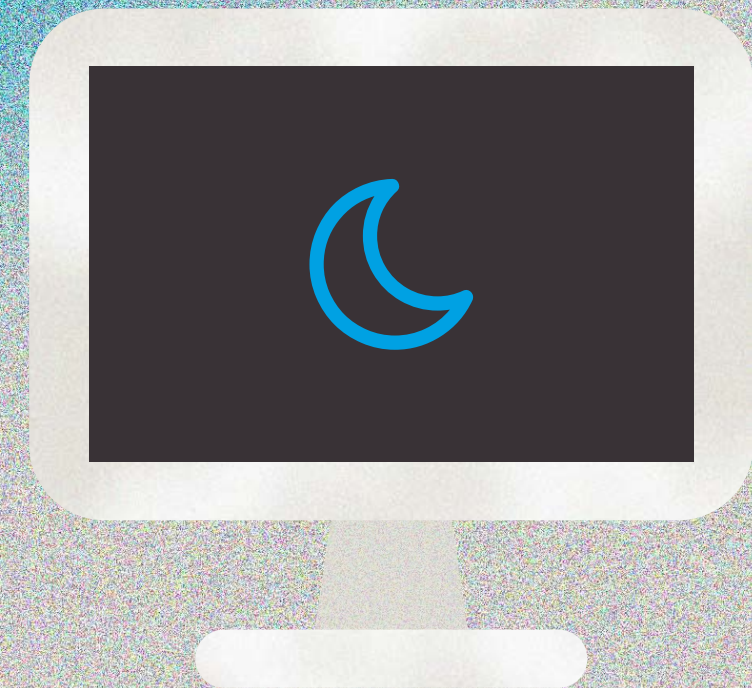
this page is about

THE SUN

this page is about

**THE MOON**

Tagging, cont'd.

PAGE <TITLE> TAG:
Think of this as the title of your book. It should briefly (ideally 50 to 60 characters) describe the primary topic of the page and entice users to want to read it. It will show up as the tab title in your browser, and also as the link title in Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs).

META DESCRIPTION:
This is like a synopsis of the book. A short (100- to 160-character) summarization of the copy. It is used as the teaser shown immediately under the page title on SERPs. Combined with your title tag, this snippet may very well be the first opportunity you have to entice a user to look into your company, so make it count.
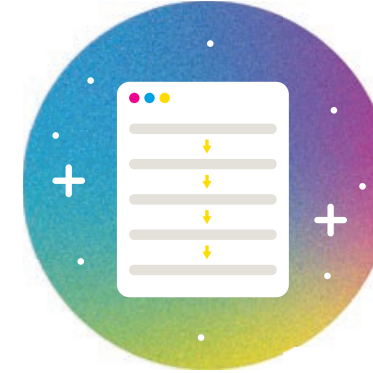
SITEMAP:
The Table of Contents of your book. The intent is to provide search engine crawlers with a list of every page you want them to crawl. Hidden, protected or no-index pages should be left off.
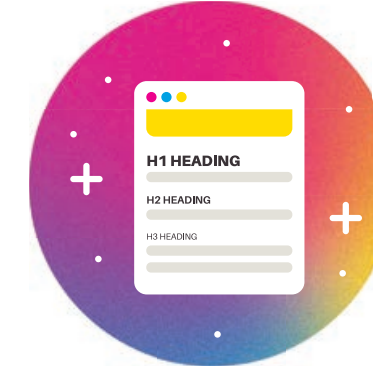
H-TAGS (H1 TO H6, IF NEEDED):
Commonly seen on the page as bolded headers that separate sections. These act as the chapters of your book. If your title tag is what the title looks like in a search result page, then your H1 should act as the title of that book on the landing page itself; as such, only one H1 tag should appear on the page. H-tags should progress to higher numbers as needed, forming a categorical tree of sub-sections.

To illustrate:
- › **H1:** Life sciences laboratory equipment
  - › **H2:** Ultralow-temperature freezers
    - › **H3:** Upright configuration
      - › **H4:** Temperature range
   - › **H5:** Model number

ROBOT TAGS:
Think of this like a publishing company sending clues to a library about your catalog. These tags tell search engine crawlers some rules for a page, such as whether or not to index it, how often it should be crawled for new or revised content, and if images for the page should be ignored.

CANONICAL TAGS:
Say you've got one book published with various cover options for different readers in mind. Nothing wrong with that, but let's save our librarians the frustration of having to crack open each variation of the same book and figure it out for themselves. These tags simply help you to inform Google when a group of identical pages or very similar pages should just be treated as one page.
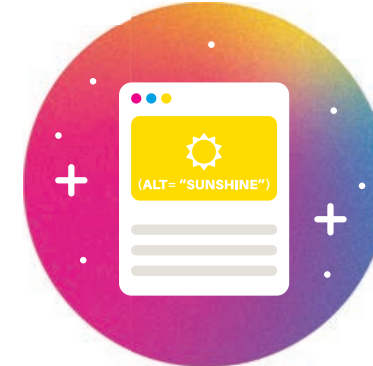
ALT TAGS:
Say you've got an audio book, but part of the book has an important image that needs to be described to your listeners. These tags verbally describe an image to search engines or visually impaired users who cannot see the image when aided through screen-readers. While Google is rapidly evolving its image-recognition algorithms, these elements can further help Google to understand what the image is and why it's significant to the page.

PERFORMANCE AND USABILITY
Because Nobody Likes Clunky Websites

Search engines do everything they can to send users to the best possible website for their search, including considering how user-friendly a website is. But even if your content is great, you're less likely to land a high ranking if your website has indicators of a poor user experience.

Ensuring your website is "performing" well requires persistence. Websites grow, servers age, content moves or is deleted, and platforms undergo functionality enhancements. All these things can lead to performance and usability issues. (See key factors that must be managed on the right.)

One additional area to keep in mind is how crucially important the mobile experience is for SEO success. Far too often, the claim is made that mobile doesn't matter (i.e., "My audience only uses desktop anyway."). Many times, this is not the case and more of a self-fulfilling prophecy. While it might be true that your data suggests your traffic is currently only driven by desktop devices, that's not suggesting it couldn't be augmented with mobile. Keep in mind that since 2015, most searches in Google are being conducted via mobile devices. It's in their best interest as a search engine to favor websites with well-optimized mobile pages. Ultimately, we shouldn't try controlling our users' device habits. Instead, we should anticipate that they will arrive at our content through a mix of devices, browsers, etc. and prepare to provide them.
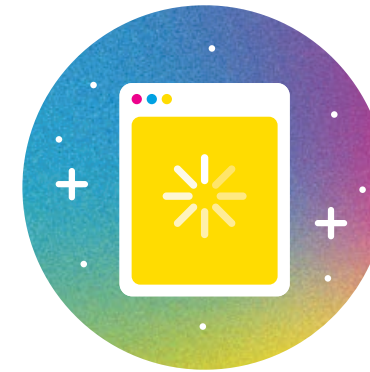
LOAD TIMES:
Websites can be hindered by unoptimized, large images, videos or other assets. "Heavy" code/functionality, server or network issues, and other factors can also contribute.

BROKEN PAGES:
These usually are present in 404 (page not found) or 5xx (server error) responses. Directing users to pages that don't exist or load properly will get you penalized.

REDIRECTS:
Redirects are essential in making sure websites can help you to avoid tricky situations like redirect chains or ensuring redirected pages are NOT in your sitemap. You should also update on-site links to point to current pages instead of expired pages that will redirect.

GENERAL USER METRICS:
If pages exhibit poor bounce rates, on-page times or other indicators that they are not providing value, they should be analyzed to determine the cause.

REPUTABILITY

Earn Your Street Cred

One of the most misunderstood aspects of what drives SEO is that not all of it is driven by your SEO people. Take Stirling Ultracold's exponential organic growth in Q4 2020, for example.

Before this surge, the SEO team was making steady gains by cleaning up HTML tags, modifying design on key pages, selectively expanding copy, etc. At the end of Q3, however, Stirling Ultracold was thrust into the public spotlight due to their role in the COVID-19 vaccine supply chain. Not only did they garner coverage from websites like The New York Times, NBC, etc., but they almost immediately experienced significant organic traffic gains. The traditional SEO work that was conducted before this fame helped to ensure they were positioned in search results properly to capture that attention. But the growth itself was much more of a PR win than an SEO win, even though SEO performance hit all-time highs.

This case study speaks to the power of reputability and its critical role in SEO. Google is a business, like any other. Their model thrives on repeatedly delivering the best results to users. If they were to deliver untrustworthy results, they could lose their market share in the search engine space (which is about 92% worldwide).

As far as algorithms are concerned, "reputability" is straightforward to quantify. Generally, the more credible links pointing to your site from the most diverse set of sources, the better (e.g., 1 link, each from 100 different credible websites, is better than 100 different links from 1 credible website). Also, remember that brand names are also keywords. So even if you're getting some coverage on websites that don't directly link back to your website, the sheer repetition of your name in credible spaces is still a helpful win (albeit not as much so as a link).

This is where SEO ties in with other B2B marketing disciplines, such as public relations, social media, proper YouTube usage and other marketing campaigns. Any legitimate channel that improves visibility to your brand content opens the possibility to backlink opportunities.
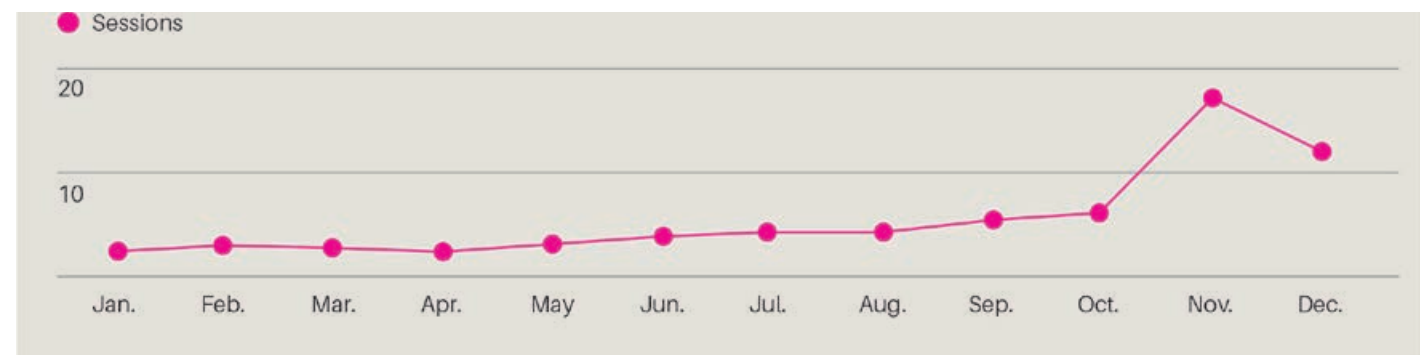
SEARCH ENGINE RESULTS PAGE REPRESENTATION
What Would You Click On?

Not everything you do in SEO has a direct, algorithmic weight associated with it. Take the "meta description," for instance. As a stand-alone item, Google does not value this field in terms of its assessment of your page. Instead, this element is exclusively intended to entice clicks.

But before we dismiss this item as another item in a checklist, it's important to think about the strategic implication it has. If you've gone through the rigor of getting your book on the shelves at your library, but nobody wants to crack it open and read it, do your efforts really matter? Instead of just asking, "Is my website ranking?", try to also ask, "Do I like how my website is ranking?" or perhaps even better: "Would I want to click on that?".

SERPs are sometimes wrongfully thought of as static things. Try to think of them like you might a social media newsfeed: results are dynamically rendered, rapidly changing and custom delivered to a unique user's perceived interests, demographics, etc.

SERPs are also therefore highly competitive. There are many spaces to occupy beyond that traditional "organic" listing. With an abundance of paid ads, organic listings won't even render above the fold of a user's screen in some instances. Influencing any SERP-related areas you can — whether they are paid results, video results, image results, localized results, etc. — can help you to dominate a page and significantly increase the chances of earning a click.
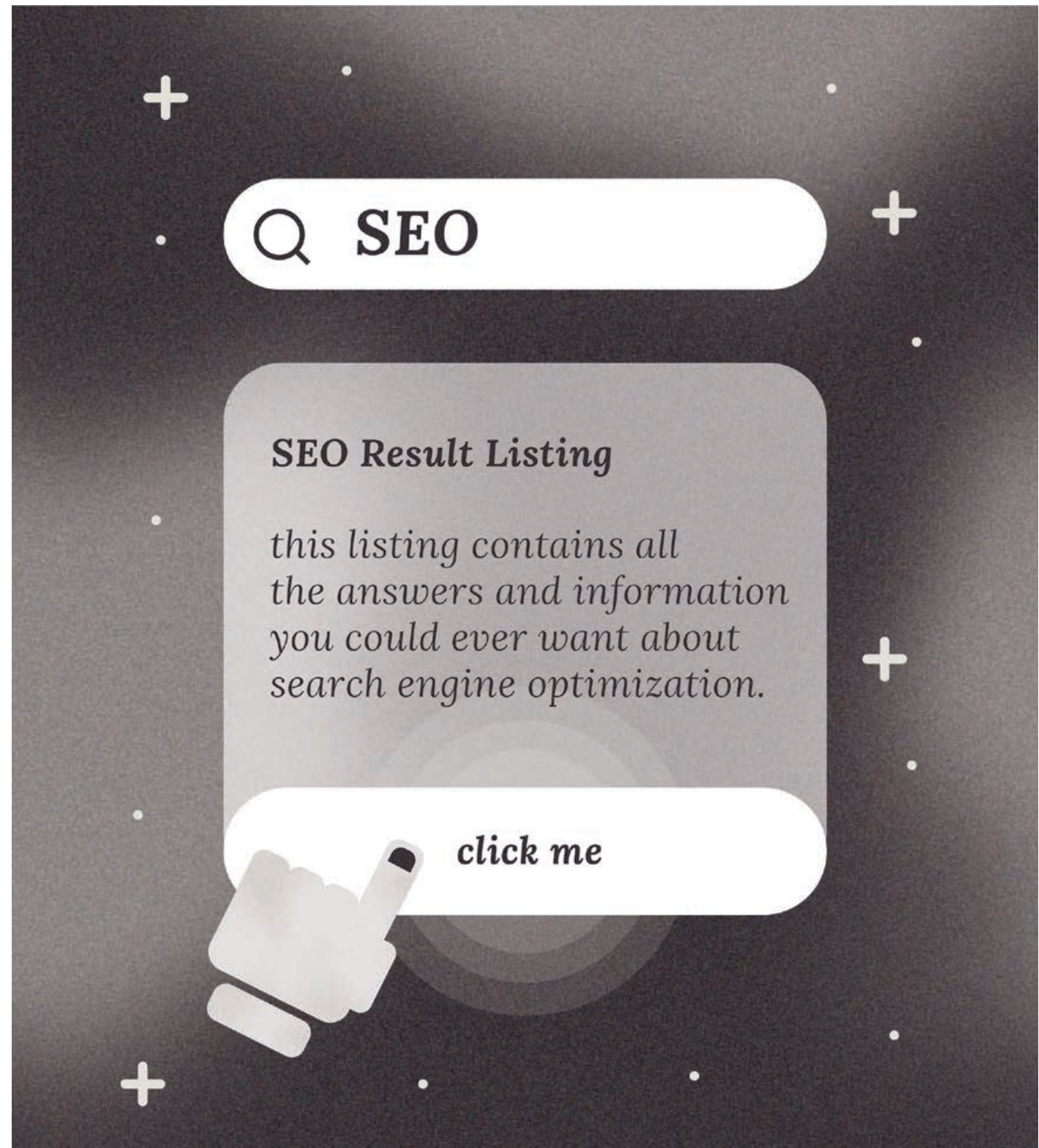
USER EXPERIENCE
Prioritizing Your Audience's Needs

When search engine users click on a result, whatever page they land on may be their first impression of your company. So it's important to ensure only impactful pages are indexed. Think through your website architecture and ask whether each page is something that would be valuable as a first look at your company. If it's not, it is usually best to no-index it. For example:

» Specific product pages, industry pages, thought leadership content and individual blogs are usually great first touchpoints.

» Pages like random faceted search results or blog listing pages are less impactful and difficult to index in a manner that is pertinent to valuable search phrases. Unless they are specifically built with an SEO objective in mind, usually the best course of action is not to index these pages.

Content: We've already talked about content, but let's reiterate here that your primary focus should be to provide content to users that is well written (natural language), helpful, compelling and authoritative. Ditch the word count and obnoxious keyword stuffing. A good content experience makes it more likely a user will continue their journey beyond the page they land on initially.

Navigation: Menu navigation should reflect this same ease of use. Search engine algorithms are able to identify relationships between pages and topics based on the site architecture and internal links. They measure the overall strength of the website based on these relationships.

User Journey: Another consideration is creating clear user journeys through the website. Every page should have clear calls-to-action that make sense for their needs and your business goals. Design your website to guide them to pages that are logically relevant progressions of their visit.

Design: Oh, and design? A contemporary website design with up-to-date navigation, modern functionality and mobile-friendly features ensures users don't get frustrated and exit your website with little hope of return. Video and strong imagery are part of this experience, but be sure to balance quality so as not to hinder load speeds. This may require you to consider things like desktop and mobile sized assets.

IS ANY OF THIS WORKING?

You may rightfully feel bogged down by a seemingly endless array of tools, all competing for your attention and budget. Some automate marketing tasks, some make reports, some monitor competitors, some do a mix of all. They're all telling you different things — and not all of it should matter.

There are two questions you should seek to answer, and both are arguably equally important:

» Is your hard work actually moving the needle in meaningful, business-driving ways?

» What have we learned that can shape our efforts in the future?

Without getting too deep down the analytical rabbit hole, suffice it to say the answers to these questions can be found in good data. How you interpret that data, and where you're getting that data from, are hugely important. See next page for a few helpful principles to keep in mind.

show results

Make sure your data sources are reliable or at least taken with a grain of salt.

Tools like Google Analytics, Adobe Analytics, etc. are usually considered highly reliable because they are measuring things happening internally on your website.

Tools that report on external activity (how many visits a competing website gets a month, for example) are less reliable because they are speculating based on observed marketing patterns, not on quantifiable performance measurements.

Determine if your data is quantitative or qualitative.

There's a huge difference between measuring "how many people filled out a web form" ("quantitative") and whether your website's domain rating improved ("qualitative").

Metrics without context are meaningless.

There may be good reasons your time on site is decreasing. There may be bad reasons your bounce rates are so low. Blend your metrics so you can paint the most accurate picture you can of what's actually happening and why.

You've probably noticed we didn't mention anything here about keyword rankings. The days of the traditional keyword ranking report are long gone. Yes, we know it's important to rank and to rank often. But due to Google's ability to personalize search results in similar ways Facebook may personalize your newsfeed, keyword ranking metrics have lost credibility. They're not static things, and forcing them to look like they're in a report is only going to distract you from measuring more important key performance indicators (KPIs) and deplete your marketing budget unnecessarily.

Speaking of which, we've got a few of the more important KPIs included in the lexicon of this document.

FINDING YOUR BALANCE

Ultimately, B2B marketing experts like you need to determine which levers make sense to pull, depending on your unique situation. Making a decision in one area could have consequences elsewhere. For example:

» You've improved your site speed but sacrificed the great dynamic elements of a page that help to tell your story.

» You've added keywords but ruined the user experience with clunky, unnatural language, or even contradicted messaging guidelines.

» You've tried ensuring every page on your website has a thorough page description, but now you have duplicate copy everywhere throughout your site.

» You've worked to get most pages of your large website indexed, but now awkward pages are being presented in search results for important keywords.

» You've gated so much of your website in the interest of driving leads that now nobody can engage with you in softer ways.

Most SEO firms struggle with these trade-offs because they don't see the big picture or think like you: as a B2B marketer. Rather, they perform like algorithmic gymnasts, not thinking much farther than "earning the ranking". Some still engage in shady techniques, buying content farm coverage or links, fluffing word counts, and cramming keywords and phrases unnaturally into a page.

SEO is a much more thoughtful discipline than that. It should account for business goals, not SEO goals. When executed well, it extends to user experience, design and driving behaviors that result in engagement and lead generation.

Finally, it takes patience. You can't do everything at once.
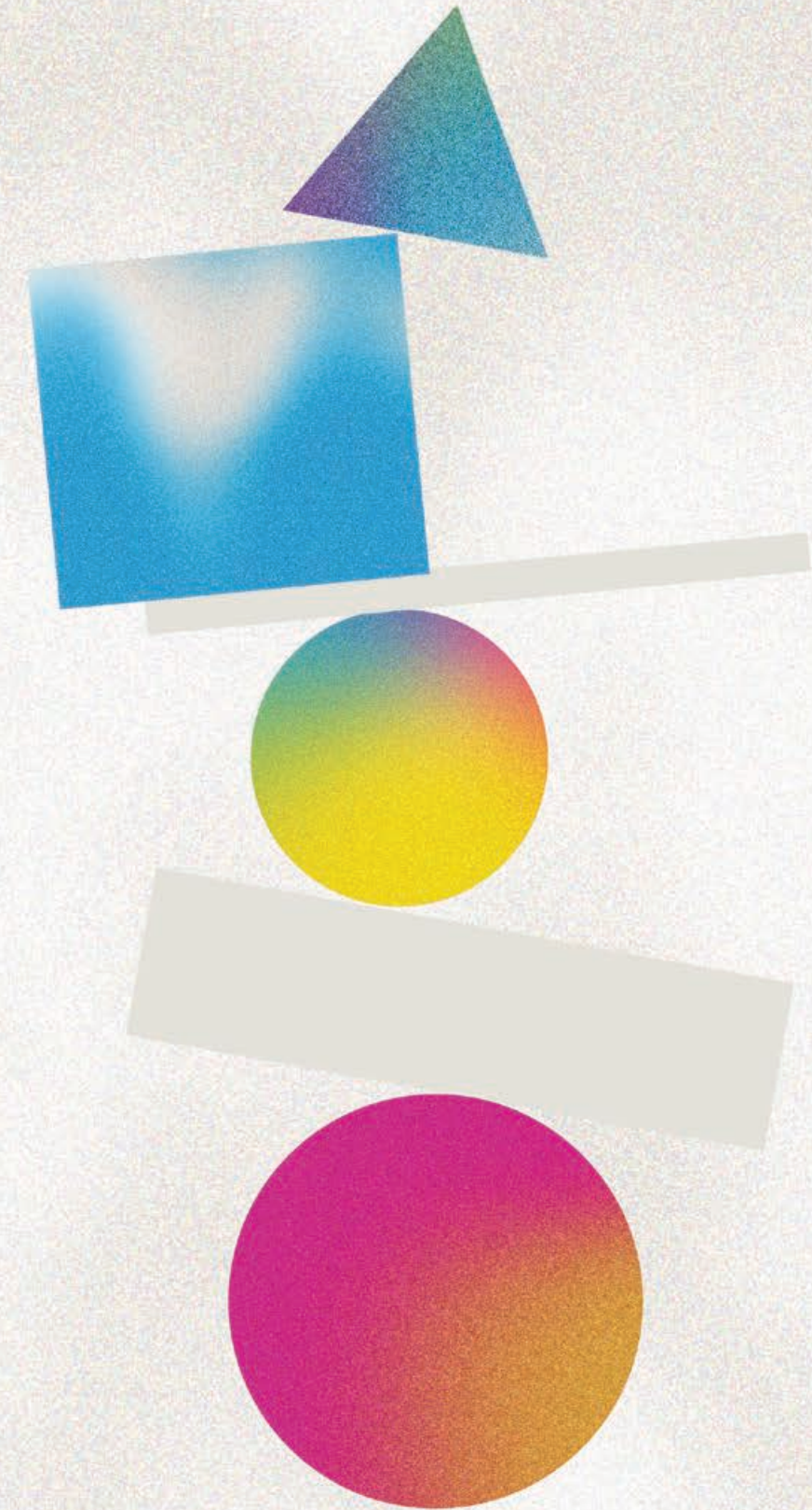
APPENDIX — SEO LEXICON

Google/Internet

backlink: A link from a different website to your website.

indexing: The process Google goes through to identify pages on the internet they may want to serve users in the future.

natural language (NL): Writing in ways that represent the way people actually communicate, and demonstrating the intent behind those communications. Google is getting better all the time at understanding these nuances of human communication.

search engine results page (SERP): The spread of both paid and organic listings that appear when a user types a keyword into a search engine.

web crawlers/spiders: The artifical intelligence (AI)-driven bots that Google deploys throughout the internet to aid in the indexing process.

Metrics

bounce rate: The frequency at which users arrive at one of your pages, and leave without taking any other action on the site (visiting another page, submitting a form, downloading a brochure, etc.).

conversions: Any action on your site you're hoping a user will take that is of greater significance to you than other actions. For example, you may consider someone submitting a form as a "conversion", whereas someone who just watches a video may be more of a "good to know".

page load speed: How long does it take for a page to load? Google doesn't want to keep their users waiting, so be careful not to make pages take too long to load.

page/session ratio: The average number of pages a user views during their session.

page views: How many visits a specific page gets, regardless of whether they are unique or repeat visitors.

session: The collective experience a user has on your site in one period of time; not to be confused with page views.

time on site: How long users are interacting with your website after they initially arrive.

Website

404 error: Usually a broken link. A user has reached a destination that either never existed or no longer exists.

5XX error: The server either timed out or experienced an error.

alt tags: Verbally describe an image to search engines or visually impaired users who cannot see the image.

canonical tags: Help Google to know when a pair or group of similar pages should be treated as one page.

H-tags: Help to organize the content page down from its primary subject (H1) to its subtopics (H2) or even subtopics of subtopics (H3+).

HTML: The actual instructional code web browsers read to render your webpage as close to the way it is intended to be rendered as possible.

meta description: Akin to the ad copy of an SEO result. It's a short description about the page a user will reach after they click on your SERP listing. Limited to about 150 characters.

redirects: When a page is either moved somewhere else on your site or removed entirely, redirects make sure all of the links to that page that may be out there on the web somewhere don't result in a broken link for a user.

robot tags: Tell search engine crawlers some rules for a page, such as whether or not to index it, how often it should be crawled, and if images for the page should be ignored.

sitemap: Provide search engine crawlers with a list of every page you actually want them to crawl and index.

title tag: It's almost exactly what it sounds like. It's the title of your page, in HTML form. It shows up in your web browser tab but also in search results as the SEO headline. Limited to about 60 characters.