



STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

SEO for the CEO

Or, What Every CEO Needs to Know about SEO,
One Paragraph at a Time

INTRODUCTION

SEO, OR SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION, HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS AN ART, A SCIENCE, BLACK MAGIC, AND A MONEY PIT. IN REALITY, SEO IS AN EXTREMELY TECHNICAL AND IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF INTERNET MARKETING, AND ONE THAT IS WIDELY USED — AND OFTEN MISUSED — BY B2B FIRMS OF ALL SIZES.

SEO PROGRAMS ARE MOST SUCCESSFUL WHEN THE PRINCIPLES OF SEO ARE CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD AT ALL LEVELS OF AN ORGANIZATION. HOWEVER, MANY CORPORATE LEADERS ARE UNSURE HOW TO PROCEED WITH SEO BECAUSE OF ITS TECHNICAL NATURE AND THE PROLIFERATION OF CONTRADICTION, INACCURATE INFORMATION THAT THEY READ ON THE WEB AND HEAR FROM SUPPOSED EXPERTS.

THIS INTELLIGENCE BRIEF IS DESIGNED TO HELP CORPORATE LEADERS GET A CLEAR PICTURE OF WHAT SEO IS, WHY IT IS IMPORTANT, AND HOW TO MAKE IT CONTRIBUTE TO THE SUCCESS OF THEIR ORGANIZATIONS IN A POWERFUL WAY.



STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

What SEO Is

The Definition of SEO

In technical terms, SEO is a set of activities that increases the organic (as opposed to paid) visibility of Web pages for searches conducted on Google and other public search engines. In plain English, SEO is what enables people to find you when they are looking for the stuff you sell. The higher you rank for a given search, the more people will click on your link. In short, SEO's purpose is to drive a high volume of qualified traffic to your website.



SEO Is Simple ... But Also Complex

The purpose of SEO is simple enough. The complexity comes in because the formula, or algorithm, Google uses (henceforth we will use “Google” to represent all search engines) to determine where Web pages rank is elaborate and includes a host of ranking factors. We will discuss the most important ranking factors later, but for now, it is important to know that SEO activities are undertaken to improve a website's score for each one of them.

SEO Is Strategic

Jumping into SEO without a clear-cut strategy is a recipe for disaster. Before search terms for which to optimize can be identified and exploited, a firm must understand the search language and search behavior of its market, and define the specific market segments it will target. Since SEO is an ongoing proposition, human resources and budgets must be carefully allocated. Finally, a site should be optimized for conversion before launching an SEO program. There is little point in driving traffic to a website if the site does a poor job of converting that traffic into leads or customers.

SEO Is a Necessity

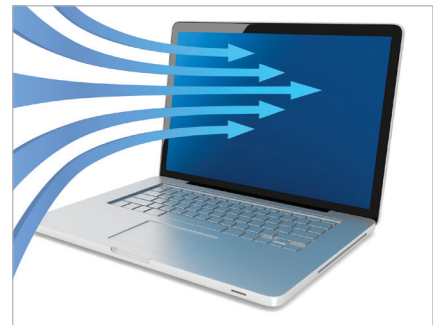
You can't drink water from an empty well, and you can't generate sales without leads. E-commerce and lead-generation sites exist for the purpose of generating sales; without SEO, these sites depend entirely on the strength of their brand, word of mouth, and sheer luck to fill the lead pipeline. With effective SEO, the pipeline is filled systematically, perpetually, and ever more quickly. No other Internet marketing discipline matters unless there is a pool of visitors on the site to market to.



What SEO Is Not

SEO Is Not About Making Sales

The effectiveness of an SEO program should be evaluated in terms of traffic generation, not how many sales were made on a website or how many contact forms were filled out. The job of SEO is to get qualified visitors to the site. From there, it is the marketing discipline of conversion optimization that influences how many orders and leads are processed.



SEO Is Not a Magic Bullet

As may be obvious from the comment above, SEO is not a stand-alone activity. If a firm devotes its entire budget to SEO, it may generate an enormous amount of traffic ... that never turns into a sale or lead. That's why conversion optimization and SEO go hand-in-hand. Other disciplines that frequently complement SEO are social media marketing and paid search marketing.

SEO Is Not Manipulation

In some quarters, SEO is regarded as an elaborate exercise in tricking Google into giving a site higher rankings than it deserves. Indeed "black hat" SEO practitioners do exist, but a valid SEO program is never treachery but, instead, a set of techniques designed to bring to Google's attention the true, underlying value of a company as expressed in its Web presence. In our experience, firms typically bring tremendous value to their market, but their own sites get in the way, making it impossible for Google to get the message!

SEO Is Not Overnight

Google is big and doesn't change its opinion about the value of a site's content overnight. In fact, longevity and consistency are ranking factors that Google considers to be extremely important. It can take several weeks to several months to see the effects of SEO activities in actual ranking performance.

SEO Is Not Going Away

As you will see, Google continues to dominate the field when consumers and businesses are researching and making purchases. The skyrocketing use of mobile devices and social media is not eliminating the need for SEO; rather, these communication platforms are creating new optimization opportunities and challenges.

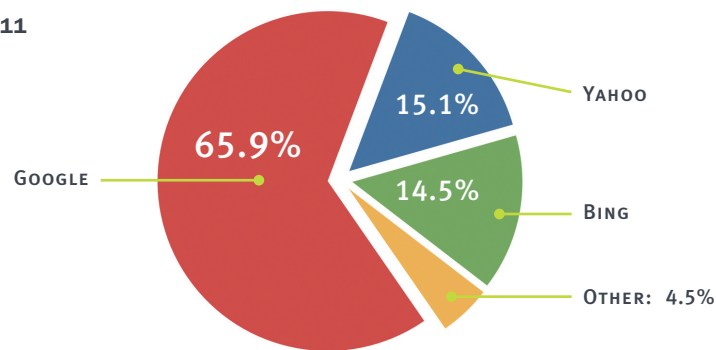


STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

A Few Interesting SEO Statistics

- GOOGLE CURRENTLY PROCESSES MORE THAN 1 BILLION SEARCH QUERIES PER DAY.
- 92% OF PEOPLE SEARCH ACROSS THE FIRST THREE PAGES OF A SEARCH RESULT (ECONSULTANCY).
- 80% OF BUSINESS SEARCHES ARE RESEARCH-BASED; 10% ARE TRANSACTIONAL (ECONSULTANCY).
- FOR 2012, 47% OF RESPONDING FIRMS ARE IN THE TRIAL PHASE OF SEO, 44% ARE IN THE TRANSITION PHASE, AND 36% HAVE A STRATEGIC PROGRAM (*Marketing Sherpa*).

MARKET SHARE, DECEMBER 2011



* Data provided by comScore

Why SEO Matters

More Leads

A 2011 Optify study indicates that a #1 Google ranking produces a 36.4% average click-through rate, compared to a 2.2% click-through rate for a #10 ranking. In other words, if 10,000 people search for “sheet metal fabrication,” 3,640 of them will click on the first link and 220 on the tenth link. Clearly, a strong correlation exists between where a Web page ranks and the number of visitors who will land on that page. Even slight improvements from SEO can have high impact.

More Qualified Leads

A solid keyword strategy ensures quality as well as quantity of traffic. Obviously, it wouldn't help a sheet metal fabricator to pull in lots of searches for “ice cream.” However, there may be hundreds of highly popular terms and thousands of niche (“long tail”) terms that have everything to do with sheet metal fabrication. Using SEO, any and all of these terms can be pursued, depending on budget.



STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

Better Conversion Opportunities

SEO is not just about getting a site's Home page to rank high, but to get important pages within the site to rank high for searches geared specifically to what those pages offer. As an example, it is logical that a search for "credit card processing services" (see Fig. A) would take a visitor to this Home page. However, if the search were more specific, as for "credit card processing for small business," (see Fig. B) this interior page is more relevant and thus more likely to generate an inquiry or sale.



Figure A: Home Page

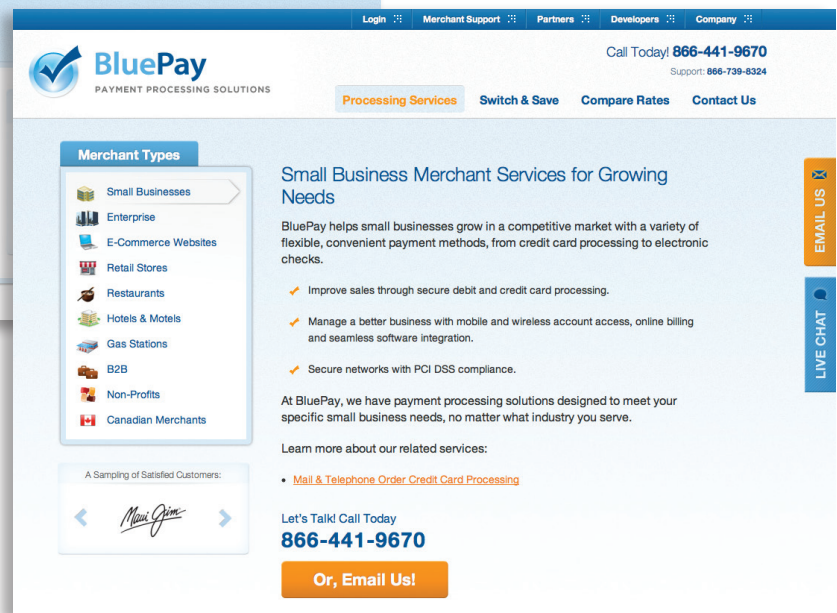


Figure B: Interior Page

Greater Brand Awareness

Repetition is important for branding. If searchers see a firm's name crop up again and again on Google, eventually they will come to recognize it as a popular and legitimate source for its product or service. They may not click on the firm's links the first or second time they see them — but perhaps they will click on them regularly thereafter.



STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

Increased Credibility

Almost all people and purchasing departments vet a company online before making a purchase. If, for example, a firm is considering a \$100,000 purchase of sheet metal fabricating, and the supplier is nowhere to be seen on Google for searches around that service, this is a strong negative indicator and could kill the sale. For some organizations, establishing credibility is a primary SEO goal.

Reducing the Competition's Traffic, Brand Awareness, and Credibility

SEO is all about market share. There is only one #1 position, and a finite number of searches are conducted for any particular search term. Thus, as a firm improves its search visibility, it comes at the expense of competitors. As one firm's traffic, brand awareness, and credibility increase, the competition's declines.

Types of SEO

Standard SEO

A standard SEO program supports a site that is being marketed nationally or regionally. Key one-time activities: conducting extensive keyword research, developing a strategy, and optimizing the site architecture to make it "SEO-friendly." Key ongoing activities: acquiring links to the site (also referred to as "link building") and publishing content both on and off the site. The cumulative effect of these activities, when executed correctly, is to make the site's content more relevant, or important, in the eyes of Google.

Local SEO

A local SEO program supports a site that is being marketed by a local business, or supports a national or global firm with sites that serve its various local markets. Local optimization resembles a standard program in terms of strategy, but has somewhat different priorities and a completely different set of tactics.

Google: Local Search Results

The screenshot displays Google search results for the keyword "pizzeria". The search bar shows "pizzeria" and a search button. Below the search bar, it indicates "About 125,000,000 results (0.18 seconds)". The results are categorized by "Everything", "Images", "Maps", "Videos", "News", "Shopping", and "More". The "Everything" category lists three results:

- California Pizza Kitchen**: www.cpk.com/, "California Pizza Kitchen Logo, Home; Locations; Menu; Order Online; Catering; CPKids; About ...", 10 Google reviews.
- Sbarro**: www.sbarro.com/, "Sbarro PizzAchievers Earn Free Pizza Sbarro sauces to go. Enjoy our delicious sauces to go ...", 3 Google reviews.
- Time Square Cafe LLC**: www.timesquarecafe.com/, "TIME SQUARE CAFÉ, Time Square Café The World's Finest Recipes in your Neighborhood ...", 4 Google reviews.

Below these results, there is a "Map for pizzeria" section showing a map of the Oak Brook area with three locations marked: A (551 Oakbrook Ctr, Oak Brook, (630) 571-7800), B (100 Oakbrook Center #64, Oak Brook, (630) 472-3327), and C (2121 Butterfield Road, Oak Brook, (630) 317-7505). The map also shows major roads like E Roosevelt Rd, Butterfield Rd, and W 22nd St.



STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

Global SEO

Global SEO supports international firms with complex optimization needs, such as multilingual optimization or managing a set of national sites under a corporate umbrella site. Following SEO best practices is crucial for a global firm. If local sites are working in complementary fashion, their combined SEO impact is greatly amplified; however, if the local sites are competing for the same search terms, Google will be confused about which pages are relevant to what searchers — and rank none of them high.

Enterprise SEO

Enterprise SEO is a highly customized set of activities offered by agencies to support large, recognized brands with internal SEO support resources that still have gaps that need to be filled. Firms that use enterprise SEO usually enjoy a high volume of branded search traffic (i.e., searches that include the name of the company or brand), but do not perform well for non-branded searches (i.e., searches for a generic type of company or product). Enterprise SEO services frequently include strategic consulting, SEO copywriting, and link-acquisition activities.

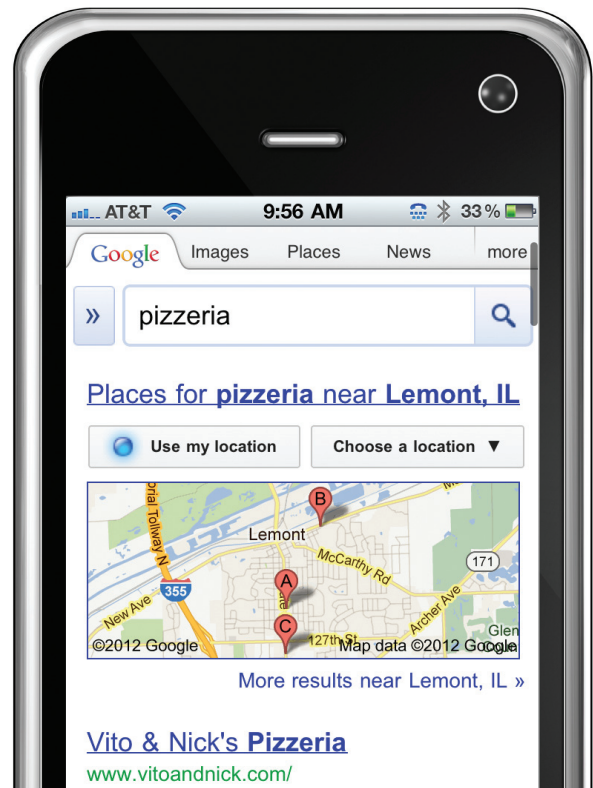
Social SEO

Social “mentions” — things like Twitter “tweets” and Facebook “likes” — are seen by Google as indications that a piece of Web content is valuable. Because of this connection between social media and search rankings, social optimization is emerging as a specialized, and increasingly important, SEO sub-specialty.

Mobile SEO

In similar fashion, mobile optimization has become a necessity for many businesses and soon will be for many more. A recent study by TriComB2B indicates that 59% of B2B decision makers have used smartphones to research products and services when considering a purchase. Mobile SEO helps firms optimize sites for mobile display and the mobile search environment, where user behavior is rather different than when searching on Google from a computer.

Sample: Mobile Search Results





Factors that Influence SEO Results

Factors Within Your Control

- **Age of domain** — Google highly values websites that have been around and active for a long time.
- **Site architecture** — This determines how clearly and quickly Google can understand what your site is communicating.
- **Inbound links** — Links from high-authority sites back to a firm's site are extremely important indicators that the site's content is valuable.
- **Quality of content** — More than anything, Google strives to deliver relevant, high-quality content to searchers. This is essentially why people use Google. Many of the factors that comprise Google's ranking algorithm are designed to identify characteristics of strong content, such as inbound links and social mentions.
- **Amount of onsite content** — If a site has a lot to say about a given topic(s), that in and of itself is an indicator of value.
- **Optimization of onsite content** — Properly using and emphasizing variations of relevant keyword phrases increase a page's relevance.
- **Relevance of onsite content** — For maximum value, content throughout a website should be thematically consistent or related.
- **Newness of onsite content** — Google values newly published content, since old content may be outdated and thus less relevant.
- **Variety of onsite content** — Besides text, images, video, and certain design elements of a Web page should be optimized for image searches, video searches, blog searches, map searches, etc.
- **Blog comments and other user-generated content** — Besides being a source of relevant, fresh content, user content carries weight with Google as an indicator of user interest and support.
- **Social media mentions** — As noted earlier, Google gives weight to links mentioned on Twitter, Facebook, and other public social platforms.
- **Maintaining a finger on the pulse of industry best practices** — Best practices change rapidly; using out-of-date techniques can be not only ineffective, but also counterproductive.

Factors Outside Your Control

- **SEO efforts of competitors** — New competitors with deep pockets or established competitors with expanded programs will force a firm to reevaluate its strategy and budget.
- **Number of competitors** — Some markets, such as financial services and real estate, are very crowded, making it difficult and expensive to materially improve rankings.
- **Size of competitors** — Certain less crowded markets are dominated by a handful of giant competitors, making it difficult to break through.



Why Companies Struggle to Get Results with SEO

Out-of-Date Skill Sets

Google continually updates its ranking algorithm in an effort to pinpoint relevant results and stay ahead of the “black hat” SEO manipulators who game the system. It is imperative for SEO practitioners to stay current, which can be challenging, especially for a firm’s internal staff.



Selecting the Wrong SEO Firm

As with anything, there are good SEO firms and not-so-good ones. Because there are so many potential SEO activities, most all of which are rather complex, an SEO firm must have a rock-solid methodology and well qualified personnel to produce results.

No Strategic Focus

An easy and common way to get tripped up with SEO is to focus on tactics. Concentrating on a single keyword phrase, a blog, or some other particular metric, site component, or activity will never be enough to move the dial sufficiently — if at all.

Focus on Rankings

Although a great many firms are obsessed with them, rankings have become an unreliable way to evaluate SEO performance because search results are now highly personalized. Personalization necessitates more nuanced SEO activities and reporting.

Improper or Incomplete Research

At the heart of successful SEO is selecting the appropriate keywords to optimize. However, firms often lack the resources and methodologies to execute this important first step.

Inconsistent Execution

When a firm attempts to do SEO internally, the staff may be pulled in different directions. When SEO activities are accomplished in fits and starts, Google sees inconsistency, which hinders, rather than helps, the cause.



STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

Failure to Review Results and Make Adjustments

SEO is a process rather than a project. There never comes a point when a firm can say, “We’ve completed our SEO.” Best practices demand that results are reviewed on a monthly basis to take advantage of new data-driven insights and react to internal and external changes in the SEO landscape.

Poorly Optimized Sites

If a site does not communicate well with Google, most of its SEO spend will be wasted, even if the underlying strategy is brilliant.

Lack of New Onsite Content

Firms often have difficulty producing relevant, high-quality content on a regular basis. Unless the firm has experienced SEO copywriters on staff, content production usually winds up as a low-priority task. Even with a productive link-acquisition effort, a lack of content seriously impedes results.

Weak or Absent Offsite Strategy

On the flip side, SEO that is all content and no link acquisition will not be successful. Managing a link building program is a complex sub-specialty within SEO, one that is not always well understood by an internal staff with many other responsibilities.

CEO SEO FAQ

What’s the best way to get started with SEO?

Start with an assessment of your industry’s SEO landscape and the status of your site’s current performance. Review such things as baseline statistics, Google Analytics, keyword strategy, and conversion goals. To do this, you may need to retain an outside firm.

What’s the best way to evaluate the effectiveness of an SEO program?

Ultimately, non-branded traffic (i.e., traffic from people who don’t know you but are looking for what you sell) is the most important grade on an SEO report card. It is important to consider traffic sources, as well as destination pages. Steady improvement is more important than reaching a particular number in a given timeframe.



STRAIGHT NORTH INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

How do I cut through the jargon and understand what's going on?

It is extremely important that your SEO team can communicate to you and other stakeholders in plain language. You are always justified in asking for executive summaries of ongoing activities and analyses; it is also helpful to schedule periodic program reviews with adequate time for questions. Having a high-level understanding of SEO enables you to ask the right questions, which is one of the reasons we produced this intelligence brief.

How can I be sure my SEO team knows what it's doing?

Make sure team members read industry-respected blogs and participate in seminars and webinars. Periodically, ask them to explain the reasoning behind their activities and for their interpretation of results. If you don't understand the response, chances are they don't either.

How do I evaluate an SEO firm?

Review case studies for related businesses or for companies in similar SEO environments; interview referrals; review the firm's documented methodology; spend enough time with key personnel to determine whether a good, collaborative working chemistry is possible; give weight to how long the firm has been in business; confirm that all work is done in-house by full-time employees (if possible) by visiting the firm and getting to know the people you will be working with.

About Straight North

WE ARE A TEAM OF FORWARD-THINKING INTERNET MARKETING PROFESSIONALS WITH BATTLE-TESTED STRATEGIC, CREATIVE AND TECHNICAL ABILITY. WE DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT INTERNET MARKETING SOLUTIONS THAT INSPIRE ACTION, GROW REVENUES AND INCREASE PROFITS. WE SPECIALIZE IN USING THE INTERNET AS A MARKETING CHANNEL AND PLATFORM FOR DRIVING LEADS AND INCREASING SALES TO GROWTH-MINDED COMPANIES — ALL UNDER ONE ROOF.

IF THIS INTELLIGENCE BRIEF SPARKED SOME THOUGHTS IN YOUR MIND ABOUT YOUR WEBSITE OR INTERNET MARKETING ACTIVITIES, PLEASE GIVE US A CALL TO DISCUSS HOW STRAIGHT NORTH CAN IMPROVE YOUR SITE'S CONVERSIONS, INCREASE TRAFFIC AND GENERATE POSITIVE INTERNET MARKETING ROI.



STRAIGHTNORTH

700 COMMERCE DRIVE
SUITE 140
OAK BROOK, IL 60523

866-353-3953

WWW.STRAIGHTNORTH.COM