SEO: The Basics

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Let's start with the basics for anyone just starting to get their head around SEO! It stands for Search Engine Optimization and in a nutshell, it's the art and science of getting a website to rank well in the Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs).

Everyone wants to be at the top of the search engines for their main keywords because unlike paid advertising, you do not pay for traffic coming to your site through these 'organic' results. Indeed it takes knowledge and persistence to optimize your site for top-rankings, but the resulting traffic is, indeed, free of cost.

What's involved in optimizing a website for the search engines?

There are a lot of elements involved. Google has over 200 'signals' it looks for to determine a website's ranking on their search engine.

These include:

The originality and breadth of your content; How many sites link to you and if these sites are relevant to your site; How your data is structured, including rich snippets, site hierarchy and URL format. The ability for your site to be easily crawled and indexed by the Search Engines. Errors or other issues with your site. Download speed of your web pages.

The list goes on and on.

Of course, the level of effort involved in getting your site to the top of the search engines is dependent on other factors, too. Such as how many competitors you have and if they are actively optimizing their sites. If you're going for a keyword like 'SEO' you're in for quite the mountain of work. However, if your target keywords are more along the lines of "SEO Company, Los Angeles, CA" then you will see results much more quickly and have a far easier time acquiring top rankings, and this is due to there being less competition.

You see, "SEO" is a very general keyword (or 'keyterm') which can apply to many things - the explanation of it, the process involved, SEO companies who do the work, etc. So Google has to try to 'understand' what you want and has to balance the potential reasons for this search query as fairly as possible.

With a longer keyterm like "SEO Company, Los Angeles CA", Google can determine more precisely what the user is searching for - we know it's a 'Company' for 'SEO' in 'Los Angeles, CA'. This narrows the results down, resulting in much less competition.

Furthermore, you could see thousands of visits a day if you rank for "SEO" but will that do you any good if you run a SEO company in Los Angeles? Not as much as you might think (We were #5 for "SEO" for several months earlier this year and though it drove a lot of traffic, very little of it was 'qualified' and converted into sales - not nearly as much as the longer-tail keywords which drive much less traffic), so we re-evaluated our target keywords.

The longer keyterm (called a "long tail keyword") is far more likely to bring you traffic that will convert into sales. So, not only is it easier to optimize for these long-tail keywords, it is actually more effective in terms of bringing in new business.