BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

SEO: CONTENT FIRST, KEYWORDS SECOND



B2B Marketing

b2bmarketing.net

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Introduction

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In the relatively short time since Google has been around (it was incorporated as a company in 1998), search engine marketing has become a staple for the vast majority of marketers. It has also evolved hugely in that period as digital specialists have adapted to changing algorithms and the new ways in which content is accessed (namely, mobile). While SEO is sometimes taken for granted, it's important that marketers pay attention to this constantly changing landscape. After all, what's the point in creating great content if nobody can find it?

This guide is named *SEO: Content first, keywords second* for a reason. For too long, emphasis has been placed on stuffing keywords into content to make sure it appears at the top of search results, but this tactic is likely to fail as Google's algorithms become sophisticated enough to recognise what bad content looks like, and penalise it accordingly.

If you're interested in creating genuinely good B2B content, this guide should help. It explains how the keyword evolved to become so important, and why its importance is now changing. It also takes a look at some of Google's algorithm updates, and how they've transformed users' search habits. Finally, it reveals how to meet Google's quality guidelines while making sure your content is engaging and likely to keep your audience coming back for more. You'll also find a run down of the B2B brands that are currently creating the best digital content.



Emily Hill

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I. The evolution of the keyword

Writing well-optimised content can seem like a complex – even daunting – task, especially for the B2B sector, which must often target a very specific audience. Most B2B marketers worry about choosing the best keywords and using them in a way that Google and other search engines will reward. We know websites guilty of keyword stuffing and other content spam tactics are increasingly penalised.

The answer is actually very simple: write good content for your users first and foremost, because the gap between what the user wants and what search engines want is growing ever-slimmer.

Here's what Google has to say on the subject:

"Make sure you make a great site, that users love, that they'll want to tell their friends about, bookmark, come back to, visit over and over again; all the things that make a site compelling. If that's your goal, we're aligned with that goal, and, therefore, as long as you're working hard for users, we're working hard to show your high-quality content to users as well."

— Matt Cutts, head of webspam, Google

So what has happened to the humble keyword? If we are writing for the user, should we forget about keywords completely? No, absolutely not. Search engines will always depend on being able to identify web pages that are using the language of its searchers. It is the nature of the keyword, rather than its importance, which has evolved.

The old-fashioned keyword

In the 1990s and early 2000s, keywords were very basic – mainly because search engines were not yet able to judge the quality of the content contained within the web pages they were returning for search queries.

For example, an accountancy practice based in Lewisham might optimise its web content by researching relevant search terms that people were using, and writing content that matched those search terms exactly, even if it meant the content didn't flow very well. If the keyword research revealed that people were searching for 'Lewisham accountant', the content would stand a good chance of being returned for the query, even if it contained clunky phrases such as 'If you're looking for a Lewisham accountant, we can help', 'For all Lewisham accountant enquiries please contact us today', 'No Lewisham accountant will do a better job than us'… and so on.

The same 'Lewisham accountant' keyword would appear in the site's meta data, and possibly in a range of off-site

II. Semantic search: What does the user really mean?

SEO materials too, such as machine-generated articles for directories; it would also appear within paid-for inbound links to the site (both practices would incur a Google penalty if used today). This algorithm-limited emphasis on keywords over quality soon created a plethora of keyword-stuffed pages and articles aimed solely at search engines without catering to the user at all.

The modern keyword

By 2011, the proliferation of these 'link farms' and article directories, as well as millions of pages of low-quality website content, had become a significant concern to Google, because its competitive position depended on its ability to give its users high-quality information in response to their queries.

Three major updates to Google's algorithm followed in quick succession: Panda (2011), which targeted 'link spam', Penguin (2012), which sought to penalise poor-quality content, and Hummingbird (2013), which heralded the age of semantic search.

The combined effect of the three updates has changed the search landscape forever, but it is Hummingbird that has transformed the way in which we need to approach keywords in content writing.

While Panda and Penguin did a great deal to penalise bad content and spam tactics, they didn't fundamentally change the concept of repeating a keyword throughout the content, in the hope that Google would show that content to a user who typed in the same query. It was Hummingbird that marked a turning point in this respect, because it started to analyse search queries as a collective whole rather than a string of individual words, with the aim of understanding user intent. This update signified that Google wants to go beyond the words and phrases people use, to figure out what they mean.

> » Make sure you make a great site, that users love, that they'll want to tell their friends about, bookmark, and come back to «

A 2012 interview with Ben Gomes, VP of search engineering at Google, just before the release of Hummingbird revealed the extent of the changes to come:

"A primary goal of ours is to understand language. There's a lot of subtlety in that. Even between the singular and the plural of a word, there's a huge amount of complexity. 'U.S. president'

» B2B content in the age of semantic search must explore semantic relationships between keywords and concepts «

tends to refer to the current president. 'U.S. presidents' tends to refer to the list of all of them.

"One of the key areas where we've made huge progress in the last few years is synonyms. We started working on this 10 years ago, and it was a really hard problem. 'Car' and 'auto' often refer to the same thing, but not always and not in all contexts. 'Auto' sometimes means 'automatic.'

"We're trying to understand that complexity in order to understand your intent, and then answer it by understanding the documents and their information intent, and matching the two."

As B2B marketers, we must do more than simply repeat a narrow set of keywords throughout our content. We must be pro-active in understanding the intent of our users – i.e. what problem they have that requires a solution – and then create content to meet this need.

Changing user habits

The changes to the Google algorithm have impacted more than just marketers looking to position their content at the top of the search results: they've actually transformed the way users behave when they perform searches.

When search engines were less sophisticated, we expected to have to test out different keyword combinations to get the result we wanted. If 'Lewisham accountant' wasn't returning relevant results, we might try 'accountants in South London' and other related terms, because we understood that our choice of keywords would trigger matching content, and we were willing to tolerate several attempts at different keyword phrases to reach our desired content.

Post-Hummingbird, we are more likely to use longer, more complex phrases when we search, because we expect to be able to say what we mean, in our own words, and get the result we want instantly.

We write much more like we speak (indeed, we can even use voice search and quite literally say what we mean), and, therefore, B2B content in the age of semantic search must explore semantic relationships between keywords and concepts, to make sure it is always aiming to provide the user with lots of helpful information.

Given that between 16 and 20 per cent of daily search queries have never been asked before, it is impossible to represent every query exactly within our content. Instead, what we need to do is create a range of informational, trust-building content to turn our B2B websites into comprehensive educational portals for prospective clients at every stage of the buying cycle. This is how to build a site that 'users love' and will 'tell their friends about, bookmark, come back to and visit over and over again.'

Five ways to optimise your content for semantic search

Semantic search requires a more intelligent approach to keyword optimisation than the old-school method of pulling up a list of keywords and worrying about the percentage of times each one appeared in the content. Here are five ways you can tweak your content for semantic search:

1. Use the natural language of your audience

The underlying principle of semantic search is natural language rather than a prescribed set of keywords. If you can create content that speaks to users in the language they are already using, they are more likely to find it, click on it, and read it.

To do this, you need to develop a deep understanding of your target demographic. Do as much as possible to find out their interests, frustrations, issues and problems, so that you can work out how they are phrasing the sort of questions your content can answer.

Once you have this information, you can start to plan your user-centric content strategy – providing helpful solutions through high-quality content written in your users' language.

2. Tweak each page for a focus keyword

You should always write your first draft for the reader without even thinking about keywords. When that's done, go through and fine-tune each page with a 'top level' focus keyword that is truly representative of the nature of the content. As well as appearing within the copy itself, this focus keyword should be present in your meta data, as well as your heading tags (H1, H2, etc) and any Alt tags for multimedia content (remember search engines can't read images, only text).

3. Simplify your language

Search engines are becoming better at spotting content that is difficult to read. After you've written a page or blog piece, go through it line-by-line and see if you can simplify the language or shorten sentences. Even technical subject matter can be presented in a way that is easy to digest.

4. Optimise for AutoComplete

Google's AutoComplete feature assists the user while a search is taking place by offering suggested search terms while the user is still typing. This can be a really valuable tool for B2B marketers: try typing out the start of some of your keywords and see what endings are suggested. You can then write content around these terms. The suggestions are largely based on user search history, so they offer a very good indication of real user queries.

5. Use Yoast

If you have a WordPress site or blog, install a free plugin called Yoast for SEO. It offers a fantastic range of SEO tools, including a traffic light system that scores each page on how well you've optimised your choice of focus keyword. It can also assess the readability of your content using the Flesch Reading Ease Scale. A score of 65 or above means your content is easy to read.

III. What sort of content should I write?

» Consider the words people would use to find your site and make sure your content uses those words «

Many B2B marketers fully understand they need to provide high-quality content to their users in order to be successful in search. Quality can, however, be subjective. Fortunately, Google has published its own set of quality guidelines, which clearly state which practices they deem to be markers of high (and low) quality.

Google's quality guidelines

Do

- Create a 'useful, information-rich site' with accurate content.
- Consider the words people would use to find your site and make sure your content uses those words.
- Use text rather than images for important content.
- Make sure all your pages have a descriptive page title and a meta description.
- Create a clear structure for your content so it's easy to navigate.

Don't

- Fill pages with irrelevant keywords.
- Put hidden text on your website.
- Auto-generate content.
- Scrape content from other sites.
- Create doorway pages.
- Try to 'trick' search engines.

» Remember: in the B2B sector, your aim is to create authority-building content that solves a business problem «

Achieving a high ranking in Google, and on other search engines, isn't about using clever techniques – it's about building a functional, well-structured website, and creating unique, quality content that offers real value to your target audience.

Is my B2B subject too boring?

B2B marketers often worry that their subject matter is too 'dry' or 'boring' to facilitate the creation of a wide range of engaging, compelling content. This is a common concern, but it's unfounded: a solution to a problem can always interest the right person at the right time.

The following sorts of content could all slot well into the B2B marketer's editorial plan:

- How-to guides
- Whitepapers
- Blogs
- Articles
- Factsheets
- Checklists
- Ebooks
- Templates
- Video tutorials
- Infographics
- Emails

Remember: in the B2B sector, your aim is to create authority-building content that solves a business problem. It doesn't need to go viral, or get thousands of likes on Facebook – its function is to build trust in your organisation.

There is plenty of proof that demonstrating expertise in this way helps to generate B2B sales: a study by Forbes found that 63 per cent of decision-makers use whitepapers to evaluate prospective products and services.

Never make assumptions when you're deciding which problems to solve: do as much research as possible into your target audience so that your content really speaks to the issues that are worrying them. Don't be afraid to talk in a friendly, informal tone where appropriate (e.g. for blogs) – it helps reduce the 'dryness' and engages your audience.

Five B2B brands creating great content

There are plenty of B2B brands already leading the way in content marketing best practice. Here are five of the best:

1. FreeAgent

This accounting software firm runs a popular blog, sharing practical advice for small businesses, such as what to do if you're late filing your tax return.

2. Simply Business

Business insurance may seem like a dry topic, but Simply Business has developed a content-rich website, publishing news articles, blogs and guides across a wide range of business topics relevant to its SME audience. Its blog includes profiles of other businesses and marketing tips, while guides provide an introduction to popular topics such as social media marketing.

3. Moz

SEO software company Moz enjoys great success with its 'Whiteboard Friday' blog, which hosts weekly video tutorials of complex SEO processes explained on a whiteboard.

4. Mailchimp

Email software provider Mailchimp runs a lively blog, and publishes content that is (in its own words) "weird, dumb or funny" in order to keep its audience entertained as well as informed.

5. Hargreaves Lansdown

Financial advisory firm Hargreaves Lansdown offers a huge range of free guides and whitepapers in order to generate leads: the user must enter their details in order to download the content.

Five tools for content inspiration

Even when we know what sort of content we need to write to keep our users and Google happy, coming up with fresh ideas on a regular basis can be a real challenge. When inspiration is refusing to strike, these five tools may help you plan your editorial calendar:

1. Social media

Social media is a fantastic source of inspiration for content, because it can show you what's already popular. Use Topsy, Buzzsumo and Content Explorer to find out which topics are trending in your sector, and then think about how you could put a new angle on them.

2. Industry trends

Most B2B industries are teeming with opportunities to generate content ideas. Thought leadership only works when you're genuinely ahead of the curve (as opposed to recycling your competitors' thoughts), so immerse yourself in industry conferences, trend briefings, and networking events to generate new angles for authority-building content.

3. Competitor blogs

First, a basic rule: never copy content from a competitor. That said, it never hurts to check out the competition and see if you can outperform their content programme with more in-depth, analytical pieces, or new angles on a topic.

4. Q&A sites

Question-and-answer sites like Quora and Yahoo! Answers can be really helpful sources of inspiration for B2B content, as they give you a very accurate idea of what information your target audience is seeking. You can also look for questions being asked in groups on LinkedIn and Facebook, as well as forums specific to your industry.

5. Customer research

By far the best source of inspiration for your content is the audience it's written for. Get to know your target readers as well as you can: talk to them on social media, ask them about what interests them, what concerns them, and what sort of topics they would like your content to address. Check out your customer enquiries, support queries, and feedback, and use these to generate ideas for your content strategy.

Conclusion

Whatever types of content you decide to produce for your B2B organisation, bear these key pointers in mind:

- Write your content for users first, and tweak for keywords afterwards.
- Use natural language and write your content in plain English.
- Use Google's AutoComplete feature to learn what users are really searching for.
- Follow Google's quality guidelines.
- Create a range of informative, engaging content on a regular basis.
- Cast the net wide in order to find inspiration for your content.

The ultimate aim of every search engine is to become more and more like a human user, so rather than worrying about optimising keywords 'for search', focus on writing good content that users enjoy reading.

To achieve the latter, use keyword and topic analysis to identify a business problem that you can help users address, in their language, using a format that's convenient and easy to digest. This is the foundation of a strong, successful, B2B content strategy.



Author biography

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Emily Hill is the CEO of copywriting agency Write My Site, which launched in 2006.

Write My Site has built its reputation as a specialist provider of high-quality editorial content for brands across several industries, with a strong portfolio in the B2B sectors.

Emily regularly delivers workshops and presentations about best practice copywriting, and contributes to several industry blogs. Her new copywriting training website, AskEmilyHill.com, is due to launch in Autumn 2015.

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About B2B Marketing



B2B Marketing

B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as *B2B Marketing* magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different forms and formats.

Its key products are:

- Online community
- Magazine
- Awards
- Research and reports
- Training
- Events
- Membership

For more information on any of these products or services go to b2bmarketing.net or call +44 (0)20 7014 4920

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