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*db practice*

## **The SEO mindset**

SEO needs ongoing work and attention if it is to succeed, and practising it requires a level of involvement and commitment to the discipline. This document covers some starting points for thinking like an SEO.

## There are no rules

In the world of SEO there are no hard and fast rules. This doesn't mean you can do what you will and throw reason and ethics to the wind... well, you can, but it's not a good idea (just because you're in the wild west doesn't mean you have to make a land grab). What it does mean is that SEO is a very fuzzy process. The algorithms are changing fast (Google now makes updates to their algorithms more than once per day<sup>i</sup>).



Illustration 1: Just because you're in the wild west...

There's a lot of myth, rumour and misinformation floating around. There will always be exceptions and outliers to even the most well established best practices. The game is always changing. Constantly reading and keeping up to date with the latest developments and information is important, but each SEO eventually has to come up with their own set of ideas about what works and why.

It's also worth noting that with a very few exceptions, in the SEO world, one can only ever measure correlation, not causation. Google and the other engines are black boxes, so it is generally not possible to run proper experiments to test these correlations. For this reason, take everything you hear and read about SEO best practices with a pinch of salt (yes, even what you read in this document), and apply your own critical faculties to them.

If you want to know more, there's a great Wikipedia article on correlation versus causation and why this is important<sup>ii</sup>.

## Think like Google

The best way to sort the wheat from the chaff when it comes to SEO advice is simple: think like Google thinks.

Google has to do three things to produce good quality query results:

- Conceptualise content in the relevant context
- Discriminate results from one another based on sensible correlation and identification of links and relationships
- Filter out spam

Sounds simple, right? So whenever you hear a piece of SEO advice, or have an idea of your own, compare it to

those three steps. Would it help Google to filter spam, put content in context, or discriminate between different pieces of content? If so, then it's probably something Google are looking for. If not, then it's probably not.

This is a rule of thumb, of course, and there will be exceptions. Google may have other motivations to include elements in their algorithm (such as to push the behaviour of web masters in certain directions), and there may be reasons why seemingly good ideas don't make it past the cut – too computationally expensive, too easy to game, etc. But putting all the ideas you hear through the 'think like Google' filter will help in many cases.

A good example of this is semantic mark-up. Many developers believe that building a web site with properly constructed, semantic mark-up is an important factor for ranking on Google. However, Google actually gives this no weighting<sup>iii</sup>. Why? Because there is no correlation between good quality mark-up and good quality content. It doesn't help Google solve any of its problems.

## Is content really king?

Playing the Devil's advocate slightly here, I question whether the oft mentioned 'great content' really is that meaningful, on two levels.

First, rightly or wrongly, it is possible, using only white hat methods, to achieve high rankings without 'great content' (although it may be harder to do).

Second, the phrase has been mentioned so often that it is in danger of becoming a meaningless platitude. Much of what is commonly called 'great content' is actually mediocre – celebrity gossip, reviews that don't constitute a lot more than a link to a product, endless lists of top tips or funny pictures. More importantly, it's a platitude that can easily distract from the hard work of marketing your web site, technical improvement, building links, etc. If you build it, but don't market it, they won't come. Great content doesn't market itself. There are exceptions of course, but in the vast majority of cases, if you want people to come you have to get out there and tell them. For SEO that means link building, social media, and on-line PR.

Having said all that, when a user comes to your site they should see great quality design, interesting and relevant content and a strong, coherent sales message, if appropriate. Anything else would be a waste of your marketing efforts. However, focussing on 'great content' and forgetting about great marketing will probably lead to failure.

## It's a process

SEO is an ongoing process; it's not a box on a check-list, alongside cross browser compatibility and checking for typos. There are individual steps in the development process to address SEO issues, especially at a technical level, but carrying those out on their own will have very limited benefit.

So what are the ongoing steps in SEO? Constantly adding to and improving the content on your web site, building links, pitching articles and content to other sites, monitoring performance, hunting for new keywords and new niches, etc.

The screenshot shows a Google search for 'Sixth form'. The organic results include:

- Sixth form - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**: The sixth form (or Key Stage 5), in the English, Welsh and Northern Irish education systems, Commonwealth West Indian countries such as Barbados, Belize, ...  
[England and Wales](#) - [Scotland](#) - [Other countries](#) - [Notes](#)  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixth\\_form](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixth_form) - [Cached](#) - [Similar](#)
- Sixth form college - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**: A sixth form college is an educational institution in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Hong Kong or Malta where students aged 16 to 19 typically study for ...  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixth\\_form\\_college](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixth_form_college) - [Cached](#) - [Similar](#)

The image results section shows four thumbnails: a large school building, a group of students, a classroom scene, and a group of students at a table. The local business results for 'sixth form near Cambridge CB2 8AY' include:

- A Cambridge Centre for Sixth-form Studies** - [www.ccss.co.uk](http://www.ccss.co.uk)  
Station Road, 1 Salisbury Villas, Cambridge - 01223 716 890  
[Directions and more »](#)
- B Hills Road Sixth Form College** - [www.hrsfc.ac.uk](http://www.hrsfc.ac.uk)  
Hills Rd, Cambridge - 01223 247251  
[Directions and more »](#)
- C Long Road Sixth Form College** - [www.longroadmedia.com](http://www.longroadmedia.com)  
Long Rd, Cambridge - 01223 507400  
[Directions and more »](#)
- [More results near Cambridge CB2 8AY »](#)

Illustration 2: Google SERP showing inserted image and local results.

## Avoid position fixation

There are now many, many opportunities around search, in addition to just ranking at the top of the main search results. For example, Google now has image search, news results, shopping search and local/maps search, blog search, etc., and will insert excerpts from these into the main search results as often as they can (see *Illustration 2*). These are called 'one boxes'. It is often easier to rank well for your chosen keywords in one of these boxes than in the main results, with the obvious benefits. For example, ranking for your keywords in your local area can put your site right at the top of the local search results, even if it isn't ranked highly in the main results.

Additionally, when thinking purely about position, it is still not necessarily the best idea to focus on ranking at number one. Lower rankings sometimes lead to traffic with better conversion rates. So, for example, ranking lower down for several different, better qualified queries may drive more conversions in total than ranking at number one for a single, higher traffic term, and that may actually take less effort to achieve.

Always look carefully at the different opportunities around your search niche, the different one boxes Google puts into the results for your terms, what the competition is doing, and how much effort it will take to rank well for different terms. You may still conclude that

it's best to hit number one for the terms in your niche, but at least then it will be an informed decision.

## Look to your competitors

Don't just look at your own site and its performance. Your competitors<sup>iv</sup> offer you a wealth of information and resources.

Most important are their link sources. There are many tools<sup>v</sup> out there for researching the back-links that a site has, and you should be using them on your competitors' sites as well as your own. Cross referencing all this data will show you where the best quality links for your niche are to be found.

Digging around in your competitors' sites can also give you new ideas for content and keywords, and looking at their sites' metrics (such as PageRank, number of pages, number of incoming links, etc.) will give you a good idea of the targets you'll need for ranking well against them.

Lastly, your competitors may be possible linking sources themselves. Not all of them may be practising SEO or realise its important, and they might be happy to give you a link if you ask. Alternatively, you may be able to submit links to Wikipedia or local listings sites, which commonly show up towards the top of the search results.

## Conclusion and takeaways

If you've made it this far, you should have a fair idea of what it takes to practise SEO effectively. It's a discipline and ongoing process, not something you can do to a site and walk away from.

So, you're takeaways are:

- Remember that **the game is always changing**, and that even the most hard and fast rules are just rules of thumb.
- **Think like Google** in order to sort the wheat from the chaff when it comes to SEO advice and best practices.
- Remember that content is important, but it isn't king. Even great **content doesn't market itself**.
- Build SEO into your ongoing site and marketing strategy. SEO is an **ongoing process yielding long term results**.
- Think about **different ways you can benefit from search**, outside of just ranking at number one for your favourite search term.
- **Don't ignore your competitors** and what they're doing. They've got a lot of important stuff to tell you.

- i [youtube.com/watch?v=dZGUnCkVHj8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZGUnCkVHj8)
- ii [wikipedia.org/wiki/Correlation\\_does\\_not\\_imply\\_causation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Correlation_does_not_imply_causation)
- iii [youtube.com/watch?v=FPBACTS-tyg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPBACTS-tyg)  
(about 1:40 into the video)
- iv I define a competitor for the context of SEO as a site that ranks in the top ten on Google for one or more of your chosen keywords.
- v For example:
  - [seomoz.org/linkscape](https://www.seomoz.org/linkscape)
  - [siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com](https://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com)
  - [majesticseo.com](https://www.majesticseo.com)