

# Chapter 1. Welcome to the Battlefield

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Virtual war wages every day. Dynasties rise and fall on the heels of search engine algorithm changes. What you're fighting for in terms of SEO ground isn't actually ground, it's quicksand.

The way a company appears in search can alter its course and determine outcomes. When search is not properly attended to, a company puts itself at risk: competition can swoop in, reputations get tarnished. By neglecting to update your company's information online, it can inadvertently funnel people to your competitors or bad actors.

## Introduction

The practice of search engine optimization is inherently competitive *yet* fair because nobody maintains top positions forever. Change is an uninterrupted force. Search is akin to a battlefield, because SEO warriors must continually empire-build or risk losing it all. Companies rarely maintain search prominence without sagacious exertion and commitment. Just like life and love, search is a battlefield.

*Wake early if you want another man's life or land. No lamb for the lazy wolf. No battles fought in bed.*

The Hávamál, Old Norse

Coveted search rankings do not happen by accident. If you want to rank in the top entries consistently, you must work tirelessly. Exalted kings of search are a rarity. Even if you're friends with a Hollywood legend, search dominance is far from a guarantee. You could get lucky—maybe you're caught in a news cycle—but do you really want to depend on luck?

How do we define search? Searching signals *the intention to explore information* via search engines. Search can do so much for us: make fortunes, help convict murderers, connect lost relatives, and manipulate political elections. To understand and then anticipate what people will explore online seems like magic for some people. But there's no magic in SEO; it only seems that way from the outside because the actions

taken are completely unpredictable. Search is the gateway to the bounteous information held within the web, the Giant Global Graph (see [“All SERPs Are Not the Same”](#)), and thus the internet as a whole.

Building a successful SEO program means being realistic about your resources, automating what you can when you can, and experimenting all of the time. Try to learn from those experiments. The thing about having gumption is that its presence does not guarantee successful outcomes. SEO programs are doomed to fail when they don't quickly recognize what's not working or when they get bogged down in minutiae, but hey, that's more billable hours, right? (Kidding!)

Search optimization continues to happen everywhere whether or not you take notice. When you're searching for something as simple as a person's name, it's fairly rare to not see various social media listings dominating page one. Sites like Facebook, Yelp, or LinkedIn easily own the top search listing on a search engine result page (SERP) for a person's name or business. If a person is not internet-active, then arbitrageurs or sites like Spokeo and White Pages will successfully rank their name. Common names often have expanded paid and organic results such as listings pages on LinkedIn or paid ads for background checks, alumni, or finding public records.

You can lose significant ground to a competitor for a highly lucrative search term if you do not invest in SEO, or at least stay aware of it. It's imperative to remain aware of how you appear online in today's business world and to the vast majority of society. One scenario that can happen if you do not pay attention to your site's SEO is that an arbitrageur will creep into the space. Arbitrageurs work to rank for what *you* want to rank for and then sell it back to you (or anyone else who will pay). Arbitrageurs are like ghost ships playing an extravagant game of Monopoly. I've seen expensive online usurping happen to companies who lag behind, and it's an unfortunate price to pay for a slow market-reaction time.

In order to grow a website's presence, constant effort must be expended. Elements of both offense and defense strategies should coexist symbiotically in all search programs. SEOs and growth hackers *alike* make moves with poles-apart tactics and maneuvers.

Everyone can make a place on the virtual chess search board. What *you* choose to do about it is up to you. I say *own it*.

Organizations with a lack of SEO mindfulness can easily become dependent on costly paid search traffic for revenue. Paid traffic takes many forms: affiliate marketing, retargeting, geo, local, mobile, etc. Paid is not a contradistinctive force to organic search. There are many fiscal benefits to paid search when it is done right, especially in the realms of retargeting or social. Mixing organic and paid search can yield interesting fruit. There are different areas of battle; prepare for all paths: instead of “one if by land, and two if by sea,” the true professional covers both. Diversification of promotional assets allows for the deepest penetration. It’s been shown countless times that people gain more trust in a company if they see its name mentioned twice or more in a search result.

There are more search engines and methods for a site to be found than a simple Bing search. Worrying about only one engine and method of search is certainly the easiest thing to do, but it’s not necessarily the best. Many SEO programs fail because they forget to variegate. For example, I’ve been watching this new socially focused eco-friendly browser Ecosia take off slowly but surely since 2013. Ecosia is fun to use and returns generally useful results. I love that my search queries are planting trees! I’m at 1,758 and counting.

At the time of writing this book, Ecosia’s traffic can seem insignificant statistically if Google is the only foil for success. A portion of the proceeds of Ecosia’s ads go towards planting trees in Africa and beyond; they surpassed four million trees in early 2016. The ads platform runs on Yahoo! and Bing’s network. It all started when the CEO and founder of Ecosia, Christian Kroll, read a book about the importance of rainforests and decided he had no choice but to take action. He started Ecosia’s predecessor Forestle in 2008, which was managed in partnership with Google. The project quickly took off and started to take flight, but then it shut down suddenly in 2011.

The stories about Forestle’s demise are markedly different, but many agree it was a success. Some people believe that Forestle’s success is precisely why its partnership with Google abruptly ended. Years later, Kroll started Ecosia with the same mission as Forestle—to raise funds to

tackle the problem of deforestation. And now, many people are starting to notice this engine. It doesn't pay to ignore seedlings; anything can happen. The internet is a magical place. If we look at the competitive data, Ecosia's growth trajectory is significantly higher MOM (Figures 1-1 and 1-2).

*Figure 1-1. David versus Goliath? Right column shows growth month over month, April 2016.*

*Figure 1-2. Alexa shows growth since April 2016, trending sharply up in global rank.*

Yes, Ecosia is based on Bing, but anything could happen. There are many rising stars in tech. New empires will form in search. Entirely new platforms and methods of search will start to exist and evolve with the proliferation of IoT and the Nth screen (see Chapter 8).

Vigilant search mavens don't take what's handed to them on industry blogs; they seek out and watch the Christian Krolls of the world, because he could be the next Steve Jobs.

Search can be text, voice, images, or video and that's about to change. This is one of the most exciting times to perform search optimization! The more screens and connectivity we see, the more important our SEO existence will become. Companies will always need experts to help them navigate ways to present themselves on the web. *SEO is here to stay.*

Now that we've talked moon shots, let's talk about the Google. We know a few things about Google's founders. We know that Larry Page is an academic at heart with a penchant for relevance. His inspirations are coming from library science as well as other hipper AI methodologies. Throughout my entire frisking career, the one concept that's always held true to the core was *bibliometrics*, otherwise known as citation analysis.

Think of bibliometrics in practice for SEOs as akin to a research paper for university academics. The central concept for relevant search results is finding what we want along with a sense that it came from a credible

source. When you're thinking about who should link back to your site, think about who you'd want a referral from in *real* life. If you want a summer internship at the hottest startup in town, who would you ask? Probably not your tennis coach! You'd be more likely to ask your science or math teacher(s), because it would be more credible.

Achieving relevance—not the dissection of AI concepts—is our guiding principle. Be useful to and thoughtful about your site visitors and you'll succeed. Search algorithm obsession is not the safest place for an SEO to stay mentally. Living in fear of updates to core rankings means *you're doing it wrong*. Anticipating penalization is not an effective means to avoid it. Virtually every SEO has an algorithm update horror story to tell.

One of Google's algorithm updates was coined *Panda* back in 2011. The update sought to downgrade poor quality content from search results. Panda hurt many warehouse-style sites that were basically crude content and linking farms. Some SEOs cried for days, because they could no longer “power it out.” Things took a more complicated turn. Updates were then made to Panda periodically and sporadically thereafter. Panda's formal inclusion in the core algorithm was announced in January 2016.

Rolling Panda into the core signifies the move towards AI and machine learning for the engine's algorithm itself. So meta! Once an update gets rolled into the core algorithm, it then runs by itself and no longer needs any testing or maintenance.

As the old adage says, paranoia will destroy ya. Don't worry about each tiny update. Look at the groupings; otherwise, you're chasing ghosts. Google has publicly urged webmasters and SEOs to not fixate on each individual component of their core algorithm:

*For a user or even a webmaster it should not matter at all which components live where, it's really irrelevant, and that's why I think people should focus on these “interesting” things less.*

Gary Illyes, Google webmaster trends analyst

## **Practice Areas of SEO**

What does a search optimization program cover? It's necessary to understand what marketing activities relate to SEO. When the search program doesn't reach into the right areas, the program can be rendered ineffective. An SEO unable to directly influence changes made to the website runs a powerless program. Web development is one of the most important pieces of an SEO program. Users will no longer tolerate slow performance in a website.

It's imperative to first examine which search engine optimization areas will need oversight for an SEO program. There are two audiences that search must consider: carbon-based life forms and the artificially intelligent computational silicon ones. When building or maintaining a search program, it's paramount that all of the pieces of marketing work together like clockwork. There is no simple tweak that conquers all for SEO—no all-in-one solution. All the pieces have to work together in concert.

Countless people have asked me different versions of the same question over the years: *what is the silver SEO bullet?* They want some hot tip that they think is a secret to search success. Depending on my mood, I'll answer with something like, "Be interesting" or "Get faster." One cannot simply unsheath magical daggers to slay search engine dragons. There is no single tip I could give that would tangibly help a person further their search domination. No matter how much fun I have with my responses, people often seem disappointed (if they do not chuckle). There is never one single piece of *hot goss* (i.e., some big secret) that's going to take you over the top without meaningful context or insights. SEO will never be a one-size-fits-all exercise.

Analytics and data modeling are what initially drove me to become an SEO. I noticed that when I made changes to my sites (and tracked them), sometimes traffic would increase. Slowly, I tinkered and figured out what resulted in more traffic. Relevance met with analytics instrumentation is the winningest combination. An SEO professional without analytics is a blind one; analytics are the key for measuring which tactics work and which do not.

There's essentially no argument that can be made to discount analytics as a core part of SEO programs. Perhaps it could be argued that mobile app installs or a mobile application's analytics wouldn't fall under SEO,

but they still fall under app store optimization (ASO). App store optimization for mobile applications is a colossal industry. Much of mobile optimization relied on paid search in the beginning, but not anymore. ASO is the cool Canadian cousin of SEO and the two can work together in terms of linking. Deep linking from within mobile apps can bring much needed oomph to mobile search efforts. When I say “oomph” I mean credibility in the eyes of the engines. Sentiment is an increasingly interesting factor for search (and social media). As machine learning evolves, along with hardware, detecting sentiment should gain importance over time.

Content and outbound communications are crucial for engaging humans and their counterparts (i.e, robots, crawlers and spiders). Compelling content that excites people fosters a site’s search dominance far more than thin corporate advertising coupled with stock imagery. Corporate communications like public relations, social media, and email also fall under the SEO umbrella. Keywords and phrases used in communications should involve thoughtful research from the outset. Planning keyword targets and goals *together* is of the utmost importance for all outbound communications.

## **PENNY-WISE, SEARCH-FOOLISH**

Keywording like crazy for product pages, blogs, and press releases is not where it’s at for search programs any longer. Before almost everyone and their sister had a blog, they issued press releases when they wanted to make an announcement. It was possible to pay to push press releases out via a service. Press releases do not carry anywhere close to the link juice they once did with humans *or* with search engines.

There are many sites and services that offer to help place press releases for SEO and public relations gains. Anything *you* can pay for, *everyone* else in the world can pay for, too. How is that a key advantage? Be cautious of sites offering “exclusive placement” for pay. “Limited time” and exclusive promotional offers rarely are exclusive in reality. It’s important to make the user feel like they’re crossing a *velvet rope*, gaining entrance to the hottest nightclub in town. Bouncers sit outside the club (not inside it) to give an illusion of prestige. Just like a nightclub, calls to action should feel exclusive. Make your user feel special—not like any random stranger off of the street can just walk in.

## EMAIL

There are many facets of outbound communications to consider. Optimizing content can definitely *help* search programs, but it cannot lead them. An unexpected example of outbound communicate for helping search is email. Yes, email. You are probably wondering how email relates to SEO. Email is a gray-haired business tool and remains the ultimate survivor of the old-school marketing tool chest. The most aged of marketing methods is word of mouth, such as referrals from happy customers. Collect the emails of your advocates and do not abuse their trust. Attaining effortless yet enthusiastic referrals is the key to scalable growth; email is the uncool minivan taking you there. Your net promoters are those customers who are engaged with your site, so emailing them is a slam dunk.

Umpteen tools purport to someday replace email (or make it more extreme) and they have come and gone. Email marketing remains useful because it drives traffic and revenue effectively for a very low cost. Email marketing also cross-pollinates SEO by boosting engagement with and visibility of a site's content. A well-curated email list can drive revenue masterfully. For example, if you allow public blog comments, a targeted email to your net promoters can yield a significant number of page views, shares, and user-generated content.

Email updates or newsletters with substantive information can also be placed on the site for content purposes. If site visitors devotedly pour over the information they see in an email, they'll probably revel in it on a website. Sites could potentially see rankings affected by email issues like excessive unsubscribe or junk mail flags. We could someday see email used as an official ranking signal. Swell!

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Now that we've had our lovefest on the virtues of email, let's look at the new kid on the search block—social media and social bookmarking. There's a sharp dividing line between SEOs who believe social doesn't count toward search relevance and those who do. The main argument for detractors of social SEO say that major search engines do not officially recognize it as a direct ranking factor. This is a misleading line of logic. Search engines also don't espouse that the sky

is blue. The major engines do not announce everything they consider when calculating results. The cloak-and-dagger element makes it a little more fun. *No* search engine will ever release details of the inner workings of core super-warrior stuff. Why would the fact that engines don't officially acknowledge social media matter?

Social sends traffic and often gets indexed, so—recognized or not—it directly impacts search. It's a classic feedback loop. I'm a go-getter type who comes from a place of yes when trying new things, so I say yes—let's assume it matters! Social media also brings traffic to a website. What brings the traffic brings the thunder, then the rain. Social is an ever-changing element that delivers relevant experiences. We should expect to see search *within* social start to matter more and more. After many years of studying numerous companies' analytics, I have noticed that when social traffic goes up, organic search generally does as well.

Healthy social traffic certainly doesn't hurt SEO efforts. Social media and social aggregators provide a lightning-fast number of natural back links and traffic. Social media services like Twitter and LinkedIn are currently being indexed by most major search engines. Aggregators like Reddit or Product Hunt will blow your traffic numbers out of the water.

There are umpteen factors colliding in the search results you see, including location, device used, sessions you're logged into, if you are walking while searching on a phone or standing still, and so on. Location is one of the most financially valuable metrics used in mobile advertising. Therefore, location-based marketers should embrace social for mobile on paid and organic fronts.

Thought and care should be given to social when formulating a search-program strategy. For example, right now tweets are getting indexed. Search Google, and you will see tweets in the results. Next year, they could formally partner or do a revenue share if they're not secretly doing it already. If I'm your SEO, then I'm going to consider anything that builds my relevance, territory, and magnification of signals. If you add all the data together, it's hard to ignore social's impact on traffic.

## **WEB DEVELOPMENT**

Some organizations choose to silo web development from marketing, which is a mistake. It is hard to imagine success in organic search

without the ability to implement changes quickly on the homepage. An SEO without access or authority to change what's on the company homepage is doubtlessly hampered. The person who has the responsibility of managing the homepage's search performance should also have some level of influence. If people have no power to affect change, then they cannot do their jobs. Failing that the data can do the talking. If the mobile version of the site differs from desktop for some reason, this should also be included under SEO. Website development efficiency and efficacy have become key elements of search performance with the advent of mobile's popularity.

Ideally, the search practitioner should lead or get involved in the user interface and experience of a website. The analytics instrumentation becomes especially important when it comes to assessing performance. In this context, *instrumentation* means the integrity and veracity of the analytics setup. If the analytics tools were deployed prior to an SEO's arrival, then he or she must find reasonable evidence that lead-tracking sources are properly capturing.

## **YOU MAY BE WONDERING, DOES SEO COVER ALL ASPECTS OF INTERNET MARKETING?**

While an SEO practitioner doesn't necessarily have to directly manage all of the previously mentioned practice areas, it's ideal for communication to be happening between these entities. An SEO who doesn't know about upcoming site updates won't know when to do their jobs. Strong communication between departments means the team will catch things like whether or not the tracking scripts are still intact after a site update, and whether or not they need to make the annotations in analytics for notable events. Annotation-worthy examples include a product or campaign launch, a new speed fix, etc.

The most successful SEO programs I've built contained the right combination of *both the head and the heart*. Content is the heart of SEO. Content must convey sentiment for people to be able to empathize and connect with it. Analytics, website optimization, and the more technical aspects are governed by the cogent side—the head.

## **Types of SEO Practitioners**

I have identified at least four distinct types of SEOs over the past decade. It is likely that most people will be a blend of types, because everyone's experiences are unique. People often teach themselves SEO out in the field, because most start their careers as something else. In my case, I started as a web developer and migrated to SEO through my love of analytics. There are only a few places that offer formal SEO training like [O'Reilly](#), [Bruce Clay](#), or [Udemy.com](#). It's more common to "go rogue," as they say.

## **DATA ANALYTICS**

Understanding large sets of data and knowing how to parse them is an art, but it calls for an analytical mindset. The analytics SEO is a former data scientist, quant, statistician, scientist, analyst, or someone who is very advanced with their analysis and knowledge of tools. These SEOs operate mostly from the head—not the creative realm (which they find annoying). They are the person who owns the task of correlating data, building dashboards, and ensuring that reports can be trusted.

Sometimes a pay-per-click (PPC) person can become a data-focused SEO as well, making them a hybrid. The most important function of this type of SEO is that they learn from the past and measure the future.

## **TECHNICAL**

Technical SEOs are typically former web developers, web designers, or software engineers who get into the SEO field after gaining the desire to be involved in what's on the front of the page, not just what's behind it. The technical SEO will always start with what I like to call the block-and-tackle elements: W3C compliance, data capture, and all the key technical elements that could cause issues with site growth. Also expect some on-page SEO, too, as UI and UX discussion falls within their realm. The limit to working with this type of SEO is that development resources are often the most expensive to a marketing department. The technical SEO will require more than administrative access to WordPress to thrive and enact meaningful changes.

## **CONTENT AND COMMUNICATIONS**

Content SEOs tend to be less technically driven because their focus is almost all on-page. They have a heavy target goal of gaining website traffic via social generation and gaining links at the core of their

programs. This type of SEO is often your content *bartender*, constantly experimenting with the finest in artisanal small-batch traffic sources. The content SEO tends to come from previous careers in writing, branding, corporate communications, public relations, or social media. Content SEOs are hooked on finding new sources of traffic for their sites, and pursue link building programs and new platforms aggressively. They also tend to be fun at parties.

## **GENERAL/NOVICE**

I have inherited a great deal of projects from general/novice SEOs. They tend to be someone who tries their hand at some SEO plugins in WordPress and experiences success because they have a willingness to learn. These types of SEOs are less experienced so they tend to have the one-size-fits-all approach, initially picked up from things like cheesy all-in-one SEO tools. Then they learn.

We all started out as novices at one point; if you encounter one, be encouraging! If your budget only allows for one person to run marketing, the novice will generally work the hardest and cover the most ground. Recognize and accept their learning curve and build some education into the job so they can fly.

## **AGENCY VERSUS IN-HOUSE SEO PRACTITIONERS**

Regardless of the type of SEO needed, many companies struggle with whether or not to hire an in-house SEO or go with an outsourced agency or consultant. My bias is significant as an agency operator, but I'll still say that agency SEOs have the power to stay up-to-date on trends in a way that in-house ones do not. House SEOs sometimes have the ability to see large amounts of data sets if they are in publishing or ecommerce properties (or with PPC to also manage).

Agency SEOs have an edge because they have access to independent sets of data that span across different industries. If the agency shares some commonalities with the client's industry or geography, this can lead to unique insights. Viewing multiple sets of industry data with similar themes like "business to business" *plus* "technology industry" allows for insights into parallel universes, such as potential upcoming algorithm dips and bumps.

One compelling reason to hire in-house for SEO is when the institution is largely dependent on SEO as a primary means of income. In this case, it's smart to keep the resources, history, and knowledge in-house. If resources are sufficient, it's ideal to have both in-house and agency search marketers collaborating together. Differing perspectives can benefit an SEO program, because more ideas mean more experiments to run.

For a search program to be successful, it must also be specific and clear. Each project should be treated like a special snowflake. If you are aware of your institution's resources and strengths, you'll know which type of practitioner to work with. For example, imagine that you have a technical product in the B2B (business to business) space. You're working with a frontend web development team, but they are all mostly working on making the product and therefore loathe website change requests. So rather than asking the website developers to enact an SEO program, you're better off turning to the technical SEO practitioner, because they'll work efficiently with a developer to quickly enact code changes. Some technical SEOs even know which tools to run on a CMS for sweet results.

## **SEO Versus Growth Hacking**

*SEO* is the group of practices for optimizing and increasing presence in search engines. *Growth hacking* is the practice of deploying a search program that is hyper-focused on growth, which involves deploying any tactics needed to reach scalable growth. There is a heavy crossover between the two disciplines, but the goals are the same: to increase visibility and prominence for the website or app being promoted.

Let's start with definitions. The timeframes tend to vary for experimentation purposes, but SEO is to longevity as growth hacking is to brevity. Growth is typically measured in units such as traffic, new user signups, revenue, and final sales transactions. SEO covers legions of practice areas, so it's common for practitioners to get pulled into other areas, potentially diluting their focus on search.

It is believed by many in the industry that Sean Ellis coined the term *growth hacker* in 2010.

*A Growth Hacker is a person whose true north is growth. Everything they do is scrutinized by its potential impact on scalable growth. Is positioning important? Only if a case can be made that it is important for driving sustainable growth.*

Sean Ellis, growth-hacking godfather

In Silicon Valley everyone wants to find the sharp path to growth, otherwise commonly known as *the hockey stick*. The “stick” equates to the line depicting sharp growth increases, often physically shown in analytics. To possess the hockey stick is to hold the key to scalable growth and make it to the big leagues, or sometimes the zeitgeist.

Growth hacking’s significance as a movement signals the entrance of developers and assorted techie hybrids into traditional marketing roles. In Silicon Valley many startups are experiencing the influx of developers and more technical folks into marketing leadership roles. It’s very common for the CTO or COO to also be the CMO in the beginning; I think that’s A-OK because sometimes very fun things can happen.

The two types of marketing seem like peas in a pod from the outset. SEO has a somewhat notorious reputation with a fair amount of developers. Some respect it and some see it as folklore. Some cannot understand how anyone could manipulate search without having direct access to the search algorithms; they believe SEO is not real. There are conspiracy theorists for almost everything, I guess. On the contrary, growth hacking seems to be more of an acceptable practice to many developers I’ve spoken to. CMO’s eyes light up when they hear *growth hacking*; it feels new and chichi.

The biggest difference between the two approaches is the level of formality and experimentation. There’s no actual “hacking” happening in growth hacking, unless the practitioners are donning their black hats off into the sunset. Many growth hackers started out as developers. Perhaps the *hacking* in this case means parting from traditional marketing realms and roles. Growth hackers extend beyond marketing into product development, because user retention is a key goal. Some of the most historic cases of explosive growth hacking success involved input into product development as well.

*Hacking* in the classic sense involves exploiting vulnerabilities in a system or network. A growth hacking “hack” in practice would then look disreputable. For example, a hack practice could be paying money for cheap traffic and then claiming it’s organic or from another less dubious traffic source. Cheaters tend to assume others will be taking shortcuts as well, so they’re betting their client doesn’t know the difference between types of traffic or how to look it up themselves.

Functionally, growth hacking means exploiting search engine weakness—not *human* weakness—but philosophically it means identifying advancement and revenue opportunities quickly. SEO and growth hacking are essentially the same in my mind, but one feels a bit more *eXtreme to the maxx*.

## **How Do Successful SEOs Allocate Their Time?**

SEOs should dedicate their time to four major areas: reading, data analysis, testing new tools, and monitoring/automation. Without a commitment to master the four key areas, an SEO is doomed to fall behind eventually. Continuous learning is the most paramount activity for an SEO.

Every morning starts with reading news, blogs (sometimes the comments too), chatter on social, and industry journals as well as outsider pieces. Though it’s sometimes hard to keep up with everything if you’re also the practitioner, it’s important to stay well-read on the topics that matter to your specific company or industry. Topics should definitely include search trends as well as top companies in the search industry, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.

Research can also be automated in many ways. Beyond search-triggered alerts, there are also social alerts and automated recipe alerts. Tools like IFTTT are a great way to aggregate content about a given topic on infinite mediums. I have some Twitter accounts that only exist to automatically feed me the information I want on a certain topic. The most critical thing to automate is competitor research. One should always keep an eye on those who want to take your spot.

Data analysis is another critical role for the SEO in charge of a search program. Understanding at all times what is happening with your site

from both a webmaster and statistician's viewpoint will only reap benefits. Data must be sliced and diced from different dimensions to show trends. Six months of data or more are typically needed to make significant organic revelations. In many cases, paid search is much faster for testing user flow or usability.

There's a difference between knowing your data and suffering from "analysis paralysis" (i.e., the obsession with data to the point it is ineffective to attain positive business results). There's another strong case for automation with data analysis. Building dashboards in Google Analytics takes minutes and they can then be emailed daily or weekly depending on the demand.

Aside from dashboards, it's good to go into any analytics tool with a rough idea of what you want to learn or prove. Staring at overviews of data for the sake of it isn't a good use of time. My terminology (borrowed from Sherlock Holmes) is that I like to step inside my *mind palace*.

Here's what that means in practice:

1. Make some assertions based on gut instinct and experience (i.e., for selling to businesses, LinkedIn is our top social lead converting source).
2. Keep an open mind as you sift through different data sources and views.
3. Study the data impartially to see what can be proven or disproved with confidence.

Testing out new tools is one of my favorite things to do. So many tools promise one-size-fits-all analytics insights; some purport to tell the future with predictive analytics. Be leery of tools that produce junky code that loads slowly. Watch out for tools that attempt to capriciously control your future, like how some CDN's hijack one's link-juice via overzealous subdomains.

The best SEO colleagues I have worked with and studied under all have a handful of tools in their arsenal. It's usually a blend of search engine hosted tools, third-party testing tools, and automation tools. We'll go into more detail on specific tools in [Chapter 4](#), but I cannot stress

enough that there's no one-size-fits-all tool on the market right now (although many claim that).

From news aggregation to data segmentation, many essential functions of the SEO brain-trust call for automation. To truly stay on top of everything, you will need the help of bots. Do not fear bots—they are your allies (most of the time). The SEO's audience is generally half-human and half-bot/crawler/spider. So it makes sense to implore help from some of your cool bot friends.

## MOVEMENT IS NOT MOMENTUM

One of the biggest SEO issues I see many companies wrestle with is conflating movement with momentum. Movement means making a bunch of changes to a site based on hunches. Momentum means running programs with discipline and consistent growth month after month. There is no silver SEO bullet. The strongest SEO programs are organized machines running in concert with the marketing and development departments.

The reason SEO caught my interest so many years ago is that, fundamentally speaking, search is a garden that's always growing. The search field of practice introduces analytical thinking with creativity and a dash of data. Art meets science. You can write funny tweets and strategically unleash them at *just* the right moment and then watch your traffic soar. If you do not fight for your turf online, then other people will.

## Standing Apart

To stand apart and get page views, you have to be copiously unafraid to try unfamiliar things. With each new search project, an SEO should shed his or her previous biases and, even more importantly, successes. I liken search marketers to ancient resting ram sharks who had to constantly move throughout the ocean to survive.

Every SEO program should be unique; each target audience has a place, too. There are demographics that convert better on Bing, like older males living in the Midwest. DuckDuckGo (DDG) has also gained

steam in recent years. The indie hip browser DDG started in 2008 to a slew of skepticism and proved everyone wrong with 500% year over year growth.

DDG's key differentiator in the market is security; they claim to not collect personal information like the other search engines do. In a post-Snowden world, people are far more concerned about privacy online than ever before. DDG also allows the user to heavily customize their own user experience. We should expect to see more and more segmentation and new search engines being born as niche audiences form and methods of input expand.

A good SEO plan starts out with an audit; begin by verifying all the details and putting together the full picture of the landscape.

## THE FUTURE IS NEAR

Old SEO practices meant a huge emphasis on keywords. Because of the popularity of mobile and speech-to-text, the focus for a program should be more on natural language. Don't get hyper-focused on particular short-form keyword searches unless you're convinced by overwhelming data that it is generating revenue. The field of search engine optimization was once focused on one major goal: harvesting intent from search.

The emerging practices of search marketing involve more than capturing what people are already looking for because there are many new places for sites to get found. Acquisition strategies within programs now often include *generating* intention as well as capturing it.

We know that SEO will continue to evolve through different devices and platforms. I believe that search will be powered by voice on mobile more and more in the next few years. The inputs and outputs are changing; the data layers are being mapped but cannot yet be understood or correlated. We're not just in text-land anymore, Dorothy. Search never truly was a text-only game—input methods like images, voice, and video content can be optimized for search. The number of people utilizing a smartphone with a voice search function has steadily increased since the introduction of Siri. Voice is consistently overtaking its own numbers, month after month.

Smartphone users have Cortana, Google Now, and Siri to help them while they are on the go. Digital assistants have begun offering a safer way to look up information while driving or multitasking.

What you will get from reading this book:

- How to perform keyword research and spot search trends
- Ways to think about the discipline of mindsets of SEO
- A working knowledge of how to run a campaign for traffic generation with analytics measurement
- Mobile and platform-agnostic strategies for search growth
- How to demonstrate value from organic marketing efforts
- The ability to ensure the fiscal integrity of a site
- The sweetest way to run and report on an organic search program

If you stay disciplined about pursuing your search education, you will rise to become an SEO superstar. Let's do this!