

Search Marketing Trends 2018

A briefing on the latest organic and paid search innovations for marketing managers to review and action

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INTRODUCTION

How will this guide help me and my business?

Search marketing remains one of the most important acquisition channels for most businesses. Achieving visibility for your target keywords and outranking competitors is vital to the future of many businesses. This is especially the case where your audience show their intent to buy through researching products and services, using search engines. In other sectors with lower intent you can use content marketing to generate demand and interest in your products by creating content relevant to audience interests.

So, to maintain and improve your competitiveness in the SERPs (Search Engine Results Pages), businesses and marketers involved in search marketing need to carefully track the latest changes and innovations by Google, Bing and other search engines. This applies both to changes in organic search results which will affect your search engine optimization (SEO) activities and the paid results if you are investing in Google AdWords. Of the 8 trends we recommend you consider, our focus is on organic for 7 of the 8.

The aim of this briefing is to help you review your use of the latest innovations in organic and paid search, to help you get an edge on your competitors. It reviews the major changes made within 2017, many of which will increase in importance in 2018. It will give you a checklist of search marketing success factors to consider your approach against, so you can identify changes to prioritise in your search marketing programme.

Who is the guide for?

The guide will be useful for anyone involved in managing SEO or paid search. It will particularly help managers who are responsible for maintaining or growing leads and sales from search marketing, but who aren't directly involved with hands-on daily search marketing. Managers will learn the questions they should ask their search specialists or agencies when planning their search auditing, analysis and improvements.

For search marketers with hands-on responsibility for search, this briefing will act as a checklist of what you're working on and planning and it may highlight some of the latest changes you were unaware of, including tips on tools and techniques from our eight expert commentators.

How is the guide structured?

The guide covers the latest search marketing trends and innovations in eight sections defined in the table of contents, starting with data and analytics, then considering applications of machine learning and artificial intelligence. We then review specific techniques such as mobile search; conversational UI; the enhanced SERPs; trust; link equity with a final review of paid search. When Google turned 15 years old, it announced the launch of its Hummingbird algorithm. This was a key turning point in the life of the world's largest search engine, with machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) becoming core drivers of search results.

FOREWORD

FROM THE REPORT SPONSORS VERTICAL LEAP

At the turn of the century, search engines were little more than directories – lists of websites that were ranked according to a small number of popularity metrics. The job of search marketers was never simple, but it was certainly simpler than it is today.

“Pick five or ten keywords and we will help you rank for those,” was a popular mantra. For some SEO professionals, that is still the case. Technology has moved on, and Google is no longer a search engine, it is a recommendation engine.

It's all about context and intent

You may have heard a search marketer say that no two search results are the same. What appears on a search results page (both in Bing and Google) depends on the context of the search and the intent of a user.

Understanding *context* answers these questions:

- ✓ Where is the user and what device are they using?
- ✓ Does the user specify any locality or qualifying words?
- ✓ Has the user carried out a previous related search?

This last point was a key feature announced with Hummingbird. You can search for one thing and then carry out a related second search to get a contextual answer. This is good for users (getting them the information they are looking for with minimal effort), it is also good for the machine learning element of the search engine.

The difference between location of user and specification of the search term is important, especially when it comes to paid search marketing. You can target people in Glasgow for property sales, but what if people in Bristol or Portsmouth want to find a property in Glasgow?

Understanding *intent* answers these questions:

- ✓ Does the user have a history with the searched-for topic?
- ✓ Is the user looking to buy a product or find out how to do something?
- ✓ Is the search urgent?

If you are on the move on an Android or iOS phone, trying to find a local business, you probably want a map and an address. If you are sat in an office searching for a company by name, the results are probably going to include the official website, a Wikipedia link, review sites and other things that are less time-sensitive.

Search marketing requires objectivity and scale

If search engines display different results to people based on a wide variety of contexts and intents, how do search marketers optimise their exposure?

The answer is to switch from subjectivity to objectivity, operating at scale using data science, machine learning and AI.

The old-fashioned subjective approach was to pick the search terms for which you want to appear. The objective approach is to not assume you know what your users are looking for, gather as much data as possible on the kinds of things they do look for, then use technology to work across those.

Instead of a search campaign that focuses on 10-20 keywords, you can be optimising your visibility and traffic across thousands or tens of thousands of search queries.

More than humanly possible

Only machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) can help search marketers keep up with their workload. With never-ending analysis needed on masses of ever-increasing data, you would have to be super-human to cope.

The digital universe grows 40 per cent each year – humans don't have the capacity to handle that. We have finite energy, we are overwhelmed by data expansion and the need for more analysis and measurement of transaction details, performance metrics, and profit forecasts. The answer is not more people. It is machine learning and AI.

PwC reported that highly data-driven companies are three times more likely to make better big decisions. At Vertical Leap, we developed Apollo Insights to apply machine learning capability to our clients' search marketing campaigns. We can analyse a wealth of data and improve our decision-making capability with the actionable insights that Apollo Insights discovers.

Most SEO teams spend 75% of their time collating data from different systems and analysing metrics, leaving 25% to implement the actions. Apollo Insights allows us to flip that on its head - performing a lot of the analysis for our specialists so they can devote more time on action.

Another factor to consider is human fatigue – machines can do the same thing repetitively, in fact multiple things simultaneously, without getting tired or bored. They don't need food or breaks.

Imagine analysing every page of your website by checking every backlink and every query against every page. Now imagine doing that EVERY WEEK. Add to that the filtering of data to spot the opportunities for growth. That's more than is humanly possible. With robots, algorithms and AI, we can operate at scale, making sure our focus is not too narrow.

Machine learning and AI will make the difference to search marketing. It will be a robo analyst that performs the time consuming, repetitive tasks that humans can only do less efficiently or more slowly. Audits, link analysis and keyword gap analysis are all examples of tasks that could be delegated to a machine, liberating the search marketer to get on with the valuable work – creativity and implementation. With Apollo Insights' help, we now work at a scale that would previously have been impossible.

This is the future for search marketing

We'll be hearing a lot about automation, AI and machine learning. There are already discussions about whether search marketing can be completely automated.

Many of the things we do manually may be replaced by, and done more effectively, by robots, but by then we will have evolved further. Search engines will evolve, user behaviour will be different, the way we seek out information will change – the marketers will need to change with it and the only way to keep up will be to look for algorithmic enhancement.

Steve Masters, Services Director, [Vertical Leap](#)

[LinkedIn](#) | [Twitter](#)

About Vertical Leap

[Vertical Leap](#) is the most effective search agency in the UK. We leverage data science and machine learning combined with experience and expertise to dig deeper, achieve more and operate at a scale that is at least 4x the capability of our nearest competitor.

Our Apollo Insights technology ensures that no stone is ever left unturned when it comes to your search marketing campaign. It collects everything that could possibly be known about your website, your wider online presence, your competitors and your overall market. It combines, verifies and analyses all this data to provide both prescriptive and predictive insights that identify all the opportunities and threats that you are facing. It is infused with artificial intelligence that provides our search specialists with a level of analysis that would simply not be possible manually; more than humanly possible.

It means that we spend more time implementing a finely targeted set of activities that are quantitatively proven to get the greatest impact. We spend more time on the details that will yield the greatest results. We spend more time on what matters most – your business.

For over 15 years, we have been leading the way in search marketing, pioneering innovative techniques that keep our customers ahead of their competitors. Our customers range from SMEs to enterprise-level, including the likes of P&O, Harvester, Ordnance Survey, Foyles and University of East Anglia.

We are part of the Sideshow group; an independent group of 170 staff with an annual turnover of £15m and offices in Portsmouth, London and Bournemouth. We are a RAR top 100 agency and a Premier Google Partner.

[Vertical Leap](#). *Search marketing that delivers more than humanly possible.*



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr Dave Chaffey is co-founder and content director of the digital marketing management advice site [Smart Insights](#). He is the author of 5 bestselling books on Ecommerce including *Digital Marketing: Strategy, Implementation and Practice* which are used by MBA students and marketing professional worldwide. Dave is recognised by the Chartered Institute of Marketing as one of 50 marketing 'gurus' worldwide who have helped shape the future of marketing.

Dave has advised on SEO since he created his first site in 1997 when Altavista was the leading search engine before switching his attention to Google in '99 onwards. He later launched and delivered SEO training courses for the Chartered Institute of Marketing, was the tutor on the Econsultancy Advanced SEO course and also created the original Econsultancy Best Practice guide to SEO. Today his main SEO focus is working with the Smart Insights team to improve organic search results for our site which generates nearly 80% of its 1/2 million visits a month through SEO, plus editing our premium guides, elearning and analysis spreadsheets for Smart Insights members.

About Smart Insights

[Smart Insights](#) is a learning platform that helps our 150,000 active members and premium subscribers in over 100 countries to increase their digital leads and sales. Our members Plan, Manage and Optimize their digital marketing activities by applying the actionable advice in our planning templates, guides and interactive elearning tools. Free members can download our free guides and benchmark their digital capability in our Toolkits covering all key digital marketing activities including Digital Transformation, Digital Experience Management, Marketing Automation, Content Marketing, SEO, Social Media Marketing, B2B Marketing, Ecommerce, International Marketing and Agency Growth.

The Smart Insights SEO toolkit

This free sample trends guide will introduce you to some key issues for getting better results from SEO and how to structure how you manage it.

For more practical recommendations, Smart Insights premium members can apply the other resources in our SEO toolkit in the members' area boost their SEO. We recommend you improve results by:

- ✅ Scoring your capability using our interactive benchmarking tool which gives you a score for 7 areas of SEO and then recommends where to focus

- ✓ Auditing your keyword effectiveness with our gap analysis toolkit that pulls in data from Google Analytics and the Search Console
- ✓ Downloading the in-depth guide to SEO, which goes into the detail you need to get better results from technical SEO, on-page SEO, off-site SEO and content marketing.
- ✓ Complete the E-learning course which takes you through key areas to improve your SEO, with each section marked off as you complete it
- ✓ Download the SEO checklist for more details to ensure you've got everything

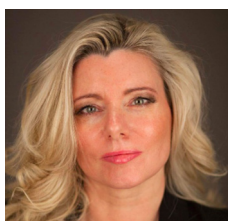
We also have a toolkit for paid best practices which explains how to get the most from Google AdWords and other paid media and both include free guides to avoiding search marketing mistakes:

- ✓ [View Smart Insights SEO toolkit](#)
- ✓ [View Smart Insights paid media toolkit](#)

About our Expert commentators

We asked 8 commentators to add further detailed interpretation and advice on the trends we have identified. Many thanks to them for sharing their experience, insights and recommendations!

Dawn Anderson



Dawn is a lecturer and researcher in digital and search marketing and an International SEO Consultant, with her agency Move It Marketing. She has been a UK Search Awards and Northern Digital Awards judge and she's a specialist in Technical SEO and SEO Developer practices, including crawl optimisation and architectural SEO. [@dawnieando](#) [LinkedIn](#)

James Gurd



James is the owner of Digital Juggler, Ecommerce + Digital Marketing consultancy & co-host of #Ecomchat weekly ecommerce discussion on Monday. He has helped companies like A&N Media, Sweaty Betty and Smythson to manage RFP/ITT proposals and been a lead consultant on high profile projects for Econsultancy, Salmon and Greenwich Consulting. [@JamesGurd](#) [LinkedIn](#)

Matt Janaway



Matt is a successful Digital Marketer and Entrepreneur based in Nottingham, UK. He is now Head of Digital for a leading UK retailer, managing a team of digital marketers and content writers as well as running a web design agency, a digital marketing agency and an agency offering consulting and training. Matt contributes to some major online marketing websites as well as blogging advice on SEO and digital marketing [mattjanaway.co.uk](#). [@MJanaway](#) [LinkedIn](#)

Steve Masters



Steve is the services director for search marketing agency Vertical Leap, where he has worked since 2012. He moved from magazine publishing (in London and Johannesburg) before moving to online publishing in 1996 as web editor for Computing. Roles before joining Vertical Leap include MSN UK, Jackpot Joy, Poker Heaven, Age UK, Time Warner providing expertise in all aspects of digital marketing and online publishing. [@masterstips](#) [LinkedIn](#)

David Sayce



David is a digital marketing consultant with 20 years of experience. He helps create and assist businesses with the implementation of integrated marketing strategies with unique insights on how businesses measure up against.

[@dsayce](#) [LinkedIn](#)

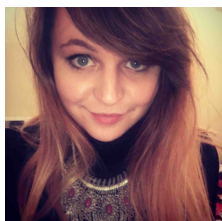
Alexandra Tachalova



Alexandr has worked in digital marketing for over 6 years. She is a Digital Marketing consultant, helping digital businesses to open new markets and boost sales. Alexandra is a frequent speaker, and founder of online digital marketing event, [DigitalOlympus.net](#).

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Hannah Thorpe



Hannah is Managing Director of White.net a digital marketing agency based in London, that focuses on SEO, PPC, Content Marketing and Digital PR. Hannah has experience speaking at conferences and events, such as BrightonSEO and SearchLondon, as well as blogging for multiple other websites in the industry, including Econsultancy.

[@hannahjthorpe](#) [LinkedIn](#)

Charlie Williams



Search veteran and content evangelist, Charlie Williams works as part of the Screaming Frog team. A regular industry writer and speaker, Charlie loves to share ideas on his specialties of content strategy, creative campaigns, technical SEO and keyword research. [@pagesauce](#) [LinkedIn](#)

1 DATA, ANALYTICS AND REPORTING

In our view, success in SEO has always gone to those businesses and their agencies who have the best data-driven processes and people to give attention to the detail needed to compete. Google has gradually improved their insight data sources and tools to help businesses identify new opportunities and fix problems.



KEY STRATEGY RECOMMENDATION 1: CREATE AN INSIGHT-DRIVEN SYSTEM TO ALERT YOU FOR SEO PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES.

Review how your business or agency can improve your data visualization and alerts to identify search threats/problems/opportunities by harnessing data APIs (Application Programme Interface).

Smaller businesses can work with insight sources like Google's Keyword Planner, Campaign Planner, Analytics and Search Console (GSC) to help identify improvements. These services have improved through 2017 and we hope to see larger data volumes and longer time intervals than the current 90 days in GSC. Although some have proclaimed (and Google has advised) that keyword analysis is futile, given Google's advances in personalization and semantic analysis, SEO still demands you know which keywords you are targeting...

To take one example, in the laser eye surgery sector, searches for 'treatment' related terms exceed those for surgery by ten to one, so that should inform your content strategy and reporting to drive visits through paid and natural search. We agree with the data-driven approach espoused by Charlie Williams:

"Use data from your analytics package to see what your audience wants from you, such as internal search data, and which topics and formats convert and hold your audience's attention the best. Use the Search Analytics report from Search Console (using the API where you can), to give you insight into topics that Google thinks are relevant for you, even if you are not ranking highly yet, and real search queries your audience uses. This is hugely powerful data to direct you on where you can take your content - data not nearly enough SEOs make the most of".



BEST PRACTICE TIP 1

Use a keyword 'gap analysis' to define opportunity.

You can make the case and review the opportunity to attract more visits by reviewing a defined set of keywords and qualifiers against actual visits to a site.

Ask your team, consultant or agency for their approach to gap analysis or use spreadsheet-based tools like the Smart Insights Gap Analysis¹ to explore your opportunities. Steve Masters of Vertical Leap cautions that the gap between page content and user queries is a common problem at site-wide level. He says:

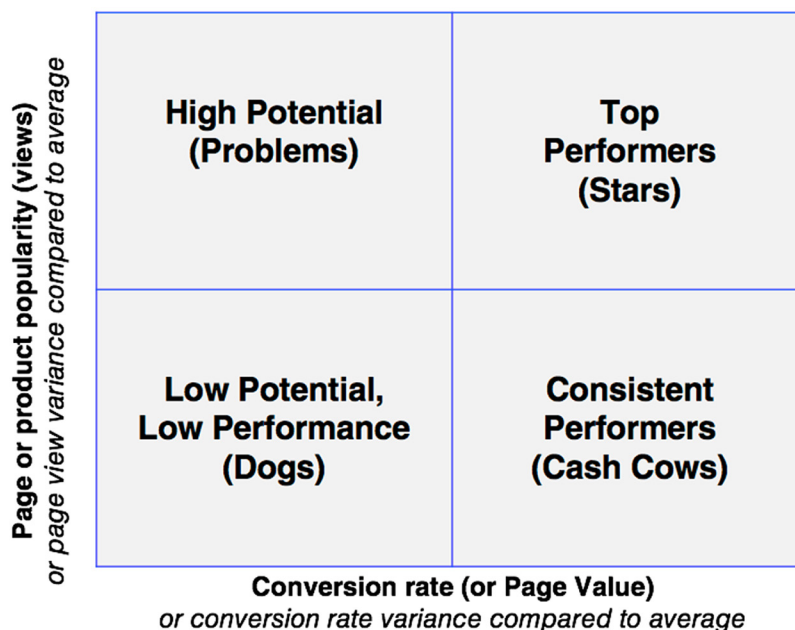
“The way companies write about themselves is often at odds with what customers search for. A gap analysis should seek to align the language and content of the website with the language of the searcher.”



KEY STRATEGY RECOMMENDATION 2: ENSURE CONTENT OPTIMISATION HAPPENS AS PART OF A PLANNED PROGRAMME.

Treat your content assets as a portfolio as shown below. Work to improve problematic content and update and surface performing content more prominently in the customer journey. This article³ gives an example of how HubSpot has used ‘Historical optimization’ **to more than double the number of monthly leads generated by the old posts they have optimized, they also increased monthly organic search views of old posts, optimized by an average of 106%.**

As part of your SEO and AdWords programmes, we recommend prioritising improvements by thinking of your content as a portfolio of pages of different types, which contribute different amounts of value to the business based on their popularity and conversion rates. Content optimization is about making your content work better for you, by reviewing content effectiveness using the type of analysis below (we now plot this in Data Studio using a visualization technique that wasn’t possible in Google Analytics) and then making improvements for SEO and conversion purposes.



¹ [Smart Insights Gap Analysis spreadsheet](#) and [monthly RACE reporting dashboard](#)

² [HubSpot: The Blogging Tactic No One Is Talking About: Optimizing the Past](#)

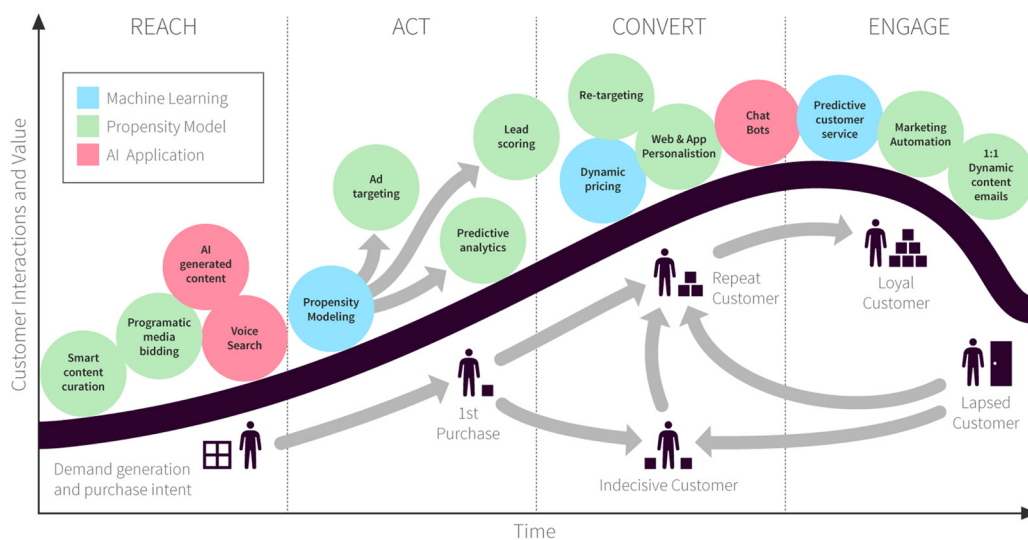
An improvement we have seen in rolling out in 2017 are data visualisation tools such as Google's Data Studio¹, Microsoft's Power BI and Tableau. These tools enable superior, more professional reports that show the channel and goals deltas (e.g. month-on-month, year-on-year changes) needed to manage performance much more clearly than was practical in Google Analytics.

Another benefit of these tools is that you can use different API data sources to pull in and combine different data. At Smart Insights, we have adopted Data Studio for our monthly and weekly trading reports alongside. However, for more detailed analysis, for our members we offer Google Sheets reports at a URL level which access the Google Analytics APIs.

¹ [Google Data Studio](#)

2 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND MACHINE LEARNING

We see Artificial Intelligence (AI) as one of the biggest trends for marketing in 2018 which will give many opportunities across the customer lifecycle, for businesses to improve the efficiency of their marketing processes³. For marketing applications of AI, we recommend you review opportunities for applying Machine Learning, which involves analysis of historical data to identify future improvements.



Within search marketing, the applications of AI follow on naturally from our first section; data-driven improvements. While you will get ‘quick wins’ and drive improvements from the type of manual analysis of multiple data sources we mentioned, this gets less practical for enterprise sites. Think of a retail site with tens or hundreds of thousands of product pages for all the SKU product variants. As organic, AdWords and other traffic sources vary through time, manual analysis and optimisation becomes impractical. Machine learning is key here, with the ability to operate at large scale with a consistency that people just can’t do.

Steve Masters shows the power of these techniques:

“AI and machine learning will make a huge difference to search marketing. It will be a robo-analyst that performs the time consuming, repetitive tasks that humans can only do less efficiently or more slowly, liberating the search marketer to get on with the valuable work – creativity and implementation”.

³ Smart Insights: 15 applications of AI and Machine Learning



KEY STRATEGY RECOMMENDATION 3: CONSIDER YOUR OPTIONS FOR APPLYING MACHINE LEARNING TO IDENTIFY IMPROVEMENTS.

New Machine Learning options are becoming available as the technology matures, review whether you can apply these to identify and manage optimisations, particularly if you manage an 'enterprise' site.

For example, Vertical Leap's Apollo Insights⁴ combines big data with intelligent algorithms and machine learning to deliver actionable insights that will not only boost your search marketing performance but also save you hundreds of hours in wasted manual analysis. It does so at a scale that would be impossible to do manually and produces actionable insights from the vast quantities of data that it harvests, verifies, refines and analyses.

Steve Masters of Vertical Leap sees the opportunity of harnessing AI in this way:

"We should teach robots to do our jobs, and encourage them to learn from the analysis and insights they compile. Marketing professionals I speak to have a handful of basic questions they want answered. 'Where should I spend money? How do I target the right people? What return will I get?'

The only way to answer those questions is through comprehensive trial and error analysis, creating hundreds or thousands of benchmarks so that you can draw insights. The only way to do all that is by creating robots that can make their own decisions and draw their own conclusions."

Another example of applying Machine Learning to assist with search marketing is Google's recently updated Analytics Intelligence⁵, a set of features in Google Analytics that use machine learning to help users better understand and act on their analytics data. It now offers marketers the opportunity to ask natural language questions, which is an example of the conversational UI we cover in the next section.

Analytics Intelligence also includes machine learning capabilities in its features like [automated insights](#), [smart lists](#), [smart goals](#), and [session quality](#). Automated insights can show spikes or drops in metrics like revenue or session duration, tipping you off to issues that you may need to investigate further. Insights may also present opportunities to improve key metrics by following specific recommendations. For example, a chance to improve bounce rate by reducing page loading time, or the potential to boost conversion rate by adding a new keyword to your AdWords campaign.

⁴ [Vertical Leap's Apollo Insights](#)

⁵ Google: Analytics Intelligence: [Launch blog post](#) and [Support](#)

The screenshot displays the Google Analytics AI interface. On the left, a sidebar lists several search suggestions, each with a clock icon: "What data are you looking for?", "what are our top pages this month", "What are our top pages this week?", "What are our top pages this week?", "top converting pages", "How many users did we have last week?", "What are my top selling products this week?", and "Share of sales on mobile vs desktop?". The main panel shows the selected query: "You asked: Organic search changes year on year". The answer provided is "Year over year growth of Sessions for Medium of organic" for the period "Nov 5-11, 2017 vs Nov 5-11, 2016", with a result of "+7.13%". Below the result is a "Go to report" button. A "Related Answers" section lists "Year over year growth of Sessions for Default Channel Grouping of Organic Search" for the same period. A note states "Based on 100.00% of sessions." At the bottom, there is a "Was this answer helpful?" section with "Yes" and "No" buttons. A small snippet of a URL is visible at the bottom left: "planning/marketing-models/use-bcg-matrix/".

Although these new AI options are exciting and are the future, we urge caution in adopting them. For example, although tools like smart goals or lists can help smaller businesses or non-experts who don't have the skills or time to implement them manually, setting these up manually in line with your known business goals rather than Google's monetisation goals, is still best for larger businesses who will need the skills and should make the time!

As Steve Masters at Vertical Leap puts it...

"Search is too large and complex in scale to be managed manually if businesses want to be effective to maximize through, particularly for Ecommerce and large-scale enterprise sites".

3 CONVERSATIONAL UI INCLUDING VOICE-ACTIVATED SEARCH

We're seeing more examples of Conversational User Interfaces on different devices. Smart Insights and Vertical Leap see this as significant for search marketers since it represents a shift from traditional keyboard-based searching. In this section, we'll touch on several themes related to conversational UI

Voice-activated search and connected devices

This is part of an evolution we can track from when Apple and Google introducing voice assistants on their smartphone operating system. Now we have voice interactions through the likes of Apple Siri, Google Assistant, Microsoft Cortana and Amazon Alexa/Echo. As 2017 came to a close, Google announced its Home voice controlled devices joining Amazon Echo, Apple HomeKit/HomePod devices and Microsoft Homehub. This is a trend across all the main digital platform providers which will feed search queries. Google has divulged that more than 20% of mobile queries are voice-based⁶ and this will only grow, but we're not sure it will grow to the extent that 50% of all searches will be voice-based by 2020, which is an oft-quoted, poorly attributed comScore quote.

Rankbrain

Google introduced its AI-powered Rankbrain in 2015 to better answer ambiguous queries or those it hadn't encountered before, both of which are potentially more likely to occur through voice-based search. It has evolved so that it now impacts more queries in different ways which may be sector-specific. This recent article⁷ quotes Rand Fishkin of Moz explaining that RankBrain seems to be weighing various ranking factors differently, based on the industry, user intent and so on, implied by the query. He says:

"It's no longer the case, as it was probably five, six years ago, that one set of fixed inputs ... governs every single query. Because of this weighing system, some queries are going to demand signals in different proportion to other ones.

Sometimes you're going to need fresh content. Sometimes you need very in-depth content. Sometimes you need high engagement. Sometimes you don't. Sometimes you will need tons of links with anchor text. Sometimes you will not. Sometimes you need high authority to rank for something. Sometimes you don't. So that's a different model".

This also has an influence on how you create content. We asked Matt Janaway about the impact of Rankbrain and he recommends that:

"While it seems to be common practice to match pages to specific keyword

⁶ [Think With Google: What Marketers Should Expect from Search in the Future](#)

⁷ [Search Engine Land: 5 ways SEO experts say you should optimize for RankBrain](#)

queries, it is in fact very important to diversify the use of semantic content around your target keywords, rather than a direct approach to using keywords. Semantic keywords offer the opportunity to target users who may search in a different way and allow Google to understand the content on the page from multiple perspectives. With the prominence of AI and the Google RankBrain algorithm, this approach is going to become vital if your SEO strategy is to succeed”.

Dawn Anderson advises that brands need to be mindful of the dramatic developments with natural language processing when crafting copy and site structures. She says: “Natural language processing has come a long way, however copywriters need to be aware of the limitations of technologies in anaphoric and cataphoric resolution; ‘they’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘we’ mean little for example”. The consequence she says is that “Search engines still struggle to pick up on the context of text without strong cues from connecting content and surrounding text. She advises naming entities and where possible, structured and semi-structured markup to reinforce their meanings and importance”.

Chatbots

Chatbots have been deployed more widely through 2017 and many of these apply artificial intelligence. This form of conversational UI makes perfect sense on smartphones where a combination of spoken or typed questions can be combined with prompts to select from a preferred response. The future of Chatbots looks like this to Steve Masters:

“The chatbots that we experience today, in the marketing world, tend to be little more than if-then decision trees, not unlike the premium rate phone scripts of the 90s. You ask a question and it sends you a programmatic response or set of options. With the convergence of voice interfaces, conversational UI, AI and machine learning, chatbots will be more proactive.

“This behaviour is already possible – we see it in the Google algorithm, which tailors its results based on context, intent and even the current news cycle. All of this means that search marketers need to accept that users will, in future, find their information in more ways than through a triggered search.”

Potentially, chatbots could form part of mobile landing pages from organic or paid search. Vertical Leap has compiled these great examples from the travel industry showing how carefully designed prompts for data, time and location minimise the need to type⁸. However, in some cases Chatbots have failed to live up to the hype and have failed to deliver great experiences for users. This is largely because companies have been too concerned with replicating or imitating human-like interactions, when they should be focusing on the entire selling point of conversational UI: providing a personalised experience for users.

Facebook has recognised this and will now train Messenger bots to handle “a narrower set of cases, so users aren’t disappointed by the limitations of automation.” However, this is just the first generation and leading chatbots like Mindmeld, recently acquired by Cisco, use what they call “Deep-Domain Conversational AI which employs end-to-end measurement and analytics to ensure optimal performance across the long tail of user interactions”.

⁸ [Vertical Leap 5 conversational UI lessons from the best travel bots](#)

4 MOBILE SEARCH DEVELOPMENTS

The growth in consumer adoption of smartphones globally is arguably the biggest trend in digital marketing in the past 5+ years which has required us to reconsider how we use organic and paid search to reach our audiences and re-configure the experiences we create.

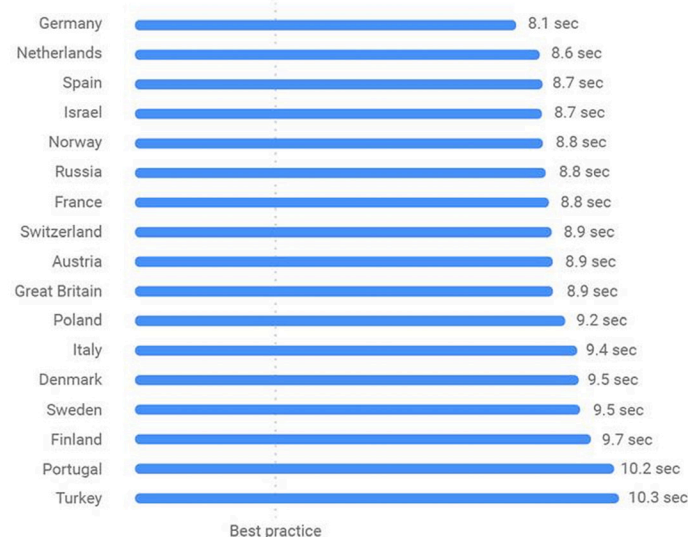
We are now past the tipping point where, in many sectors (other than B2B) and countries, mobile site visits and conversions now exceed desktop, so this requires close attention from most businesses.

Research by Google⁹ has shown that the recommended average user perception of acceptable download time is two seconds, while for the average European website it is around eight seconds as shown below. How does your site speed compare to these averages?

Average site speed by country

Best practice under 3 seconds

Source: Google Data



Test your mobile speed g.co/testmysite

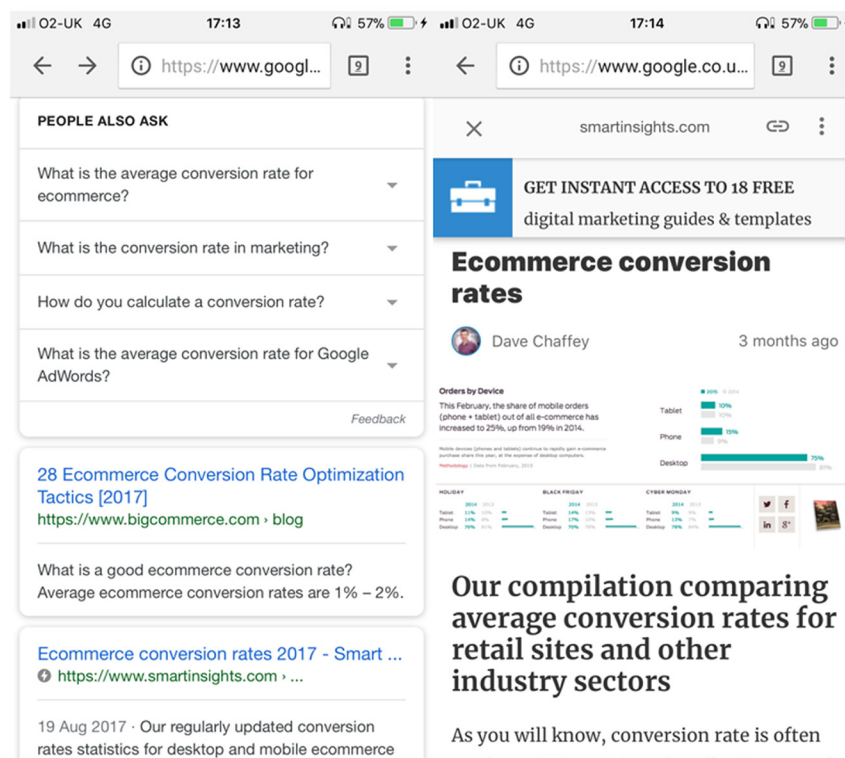
We introduce this section with this chart since it shows Google's obsession with speed, particularly on mobile) and how it has many initiatives to improve experience which may

⁹ Google: European Mobile Speed Rankings Are In. How Does Your Site Compare?

harm your site if your site has poor performance. To avoid this risk, here are some of the latest, mobile search techniques to consider.

1. Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP). In August 2016, Google announced that these faster loading page formats would appear in all search results, not just News results and so they have become more relevant for all businesses beyond publishers for who they were most relevant initially.

So, it's worth reviewing AMP potential in your sector including their impact on lead generation since pop-ups aren't permitted on smartphone by Google, so using the novel AMP features is an option as shown in the example from Smart Insights below, which shows our AMP page on the left with lightning symbol in mobile SERPs and the served page with an engagement offer on the right.



You can see the importance that Google gives to AMP, since David Besbris who is the VP of Google Search, is also the AMP Project Lead. He says¹⁰:

"In two years, we've seen the project grow from a few launch partners to over 25 million website domains that have published more than 4 billion AMP pages. And not only has the number of pages built with AMP grown, their speed has too. The median time it takes an AMP page to load from Google search is less than half a second".

He contrasts the ½ second figure with a benchmark statistic that **53% of mobile site visits are abandoned** if pages take longer than 3 seconds to load although site abandons are natural regardless of load time.

¹⁰ AMP: Two years of user-first webpages



KEY STRATEGY RECOMMENDATION 4: REVIEW THE POTENTIAL OF AMP FOR YOUR SITE AND SECTOR.

Traditionally, AMP has been most important for news and blog pages, yet these are relevant for most sites. So why do 'just' 25 million sites feature AMP and why aren't they used on more project pages? Bebris quotes research showing that *AMP leads to a 10% increase in website traffic with a 2x increase in time spent on page*. For ecommerce websites using AMP, the study also found a **20% increase in sales conversions compared to non-AMP pages**.

2. Mobile-first web crawling and index. You may remember the hype around this in November 2016 when Google first announced it. It turned out that the hype outweighed the impact and rollout since comments from Google suggest they are still calibrating the process and the full roll out could happen in 2018. It reminds us to keep a focus specifically on your visits, outcomes and rankings from smartphone visits in 2018. When doing a technical SEO audit, it is now critical to review how both the desktop Googlebot accesses your site content and also Google's smartphone crawler. It's also worth reviewing the impact on experience. Our research shows that fewer businesses AB test their landing pages for smartphone against desktop pages.

Charlie Williams reminds us that although most businesses now have mobile optimised sites, it can be all too easy to neglect mobile SEO:

"SEO's are used to working on desktops, and we tend to deal with the desktop version of our clients' sites. But as we live in world where more searches are done on phones, and have now been waiting over a year for the promised mobile-first Google index, putting the mobile experience as the primary presence makes a lot of sense. Using SEO tools and looking at the mobile organic footprint, content, user experience and analytics first is a change in mindset, but one many of our audiences have already made".



BEST PRACTICE TIP 2

Segment your mobile audience in analytics to assess mobile effectiveness

Review the performance of your mobile versus desktop landing pages and keywords in Google Search Console and Analytics and then address areas where mobile seems to be under-performing.

3. Progressive Web Apps (PWAs) and JavaScript. Google has continued to 'push' the future importance of PWAs¹¹. Google explains the benefits of PWAs and contrasts them to mobile apps like this:

"It's not hard to see why leading brands would embrace PWAs. They realize the need to provide the best mobile experience for users—regardless of platform.

¹¹ [ThinkwithGoogle: Why a progressive web app might be right for you and your brand](#)

PWAs eliminate friction by using the web to deliver app-level experiences. There's no need for consumers to find apps in the app store and install them—they can just navigate to the site on any browser, including Chrome and Safari. PWA techniques focus on reliably loading faster (even working offline) and using less data”.

It's worth considering the potential linkage between PWAs and AMP since AMP Pages can use many PWA features on their own, as long as they're served from your site's domain as opposed to an AMP cache. This means that PWA features won't kick in when consuming an AMP Page within a platform like Google or Bing, but they will on the onward journey, or if users navigate to your AMP pages directly. This developer article explores the options for these to work together¹².

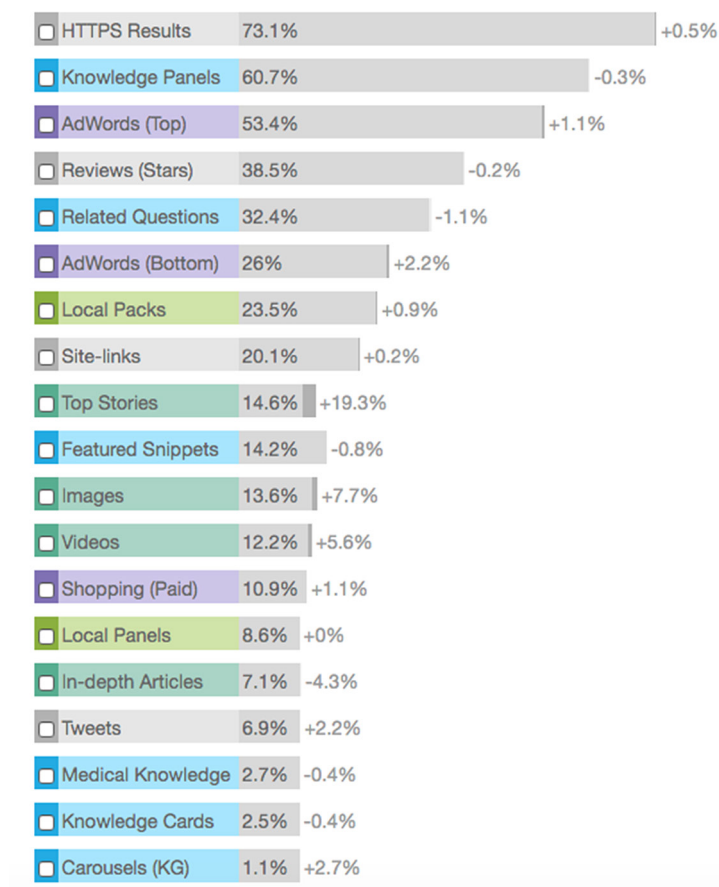
¹² [AMP Project: Combine AMP with Progressive Web Apps](#)

5 ENHANCED SERPS FEATURES

The Search Results Pages (SERPs) are now almost unrecognizable from even 5 years ago since the list of blue links and snippets are now much richer, offering options to many new types of visuals and data to support searchers. David Sayce explains the potential:

“For me, the featured SERPs have been an exciting new technique to draw visitors to websites. These can take a number of forms such as a paragraph or list and appear at the top of the results under the Ads”. He notes though, that: “However these are later stage priorities for SEO as it is vital there is a well structured and well ranking website already in place”.

Take a look at the Mozcast Features¹³ report to gain an idea of the opportunities for getting visibility. This breakdown is tracked across 10,000 top queries across sectors.



¹³ Mozcast Features

**BEST PRACTICE TIP 3**

Use Mozcast features to review your visibility for different results formats in the search.

The importance of these different features is sector specific, for example reviews are mainly relevant for retail, travel and hospitality and although images are important, they are more important for some products than others. So, review the features your competitors are using successfully for the target keywords in your sector.

Sayce recommends that marketers

“look for opportunities for the various key phrases you are targeting to see what is already appearing and check out the ‘People also Ask’ feature for more ideas. The key to snippets is being concise, develop a complete answer in around 50-80 words, or a list with 5-6 items”. He also shows how tools can help: “My personal favourite tool when working with featured snippets is SEMrush, this allows you to track where you are visible and also help you find new opportunities”.

The Mozcast data confirms what Hannah Thorpe explains:

“There’s now an increasing number of types of knowledge graph types, and enhance features in the SERPs – all of which are designed to provide quick answers to users. Whether it’s the development of the local pack or more intuitive conversational search; in 2018 it’s going to be even more important to be optimising for these result formats”.

As you would expect, after AdWords, Knowledge Graph panels (common for brand searches and for famous people) and images are most important, occurring in more than 50% of searches. Other, more recent text-based features like Related Questions and Featured Snippets (also known as Quick Summary or Answer boxes) are now vital in many sectors, particularly in information queries such as needed by business-to-business marketing.

James Gurd suggests these practical tips to help gain visibility for these new SERPs features AND voice search:

- ✓ Review how you need to update your content strategy to align with voice or natural language query-based search. For example, handling more question based searches like “What’s the best Hoover for pet hair” instead of a search query like “pet Hoover” (I like to use alternative keyword research tools like <https://answerthepublic.com/> to help me unearth question-based search opportunities).
- ✓ Identify content gaps where voice-based search intent isn’t adequately satisfied by existing content, and create new content to improve on-page engagement and CTR. Then review existing landing page content to assess how fit for purpose it is at answering natural language queries and questions.
- ✓ If local search is important to your organisation, then you should explore how to

take advantage of the Q&A feature for Google My Business. It's a new feature¹⁴, so untapped by many, but offers a way to improve the usefulness and relevance of content associated with your local business listing.

- ✓ It's initially rolling out on Android Google Maps only but will become available on all mobile browsers soon.

¹⁴ [Blumenthals: Google Rolling Out Questions and Answers](#)

6 TRUST

Google has acted to improve browser security through its adoption of secure HTTP. As the Mozcast chart in the previous section shows, for popular queries, which are likely to be popular sites, nearly three quarters of sites are secure.

James Gurd advises:

“It’s now more important than ever to be fully HTTPs site-wide. Most browsers now visually show the user whether or not the connection is secure, and a non-http page can trigger an insecure connection message – not the brand perception you want to give”.

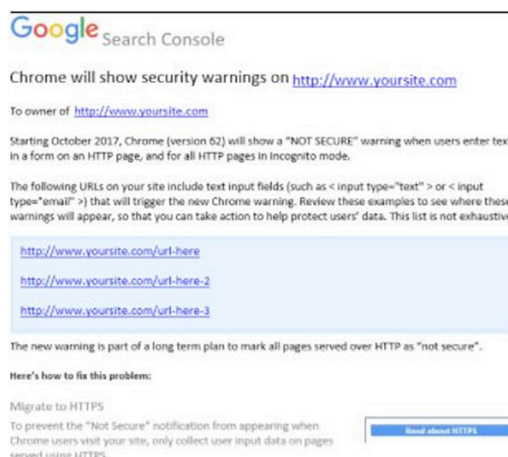
He cautions that the complexity of migrating fully to https depends on your current platform and site architecture, but given the importance of security to customers and the preference of search engines like Google to have an https connection, there’s a commercial risk of lagging behind. More and more websites are adopting https and this trend will continue, especially since most browsers (Firefox, Chrome, Safari, Opera, IE, Edge) have announced that they will only support the https protocol for HTTP2.



BEST PRACTICE TIP 4

Adopt secure HTTP if you haven’t already

The reasons are compelling, first Google has upweighted a positive ranking signal for secure HTTP further in 2018. Second, In October 2017, Google added warning messages in its Chrome browser for unsecure forms, which is likely to damage conversion rates.



But trust, isn't just about technical trust. Charlie Williams adds that he's *"also like 2018 to be a year where more brands take advantage of the opportunity to build trust with their prospective audience. A key way to do this is through building your reputation, and content, as an expert. Being a trusted advisor, delivering expert help, establishing yourself as an authority - these are amazing ways in which all kinds of sites can build a search presence"*. He says that this fits in with Google's guidance on what they call E-A-T (expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness) for content and success for sites that focus on trust, from publishers to ecommerce product pages.

Hannah Thorpe reminds us of another side of trust that relates closely to the next trend; brand trust. She recommends that you

"review metrics about on-page engagement, brand presence in the sector and CTR, which are growing to be more influential. Links can indicate trust, but they are not the only metric, so SEO strategies must become smarter".

Steve Masters adds to this when he says:

"Conversion rate and click-through rate are always higher for brand terms. The stronger a brand, the more people search for that brand, and a brand term often signals a stronger buying signal. The challenge for companies with weak brands is to boost awareness, and this can only be done, really, through PR and advertising. A user searching for 'Valentine roses' could end up on any site. If they search for 'Interflora Valentine roses', they are clearly showing an intent to buy, as well as an intent to buy from Interflora."

7 LINK EQUITY / WEB SPAM

For many years, SEOs slavishly followed the latest pronouncements by Google's head of web spam, Matt Cutts. The latest changes to algorithm updates, like Panda and Penguin, to improve the quality of SERPs, were analysed in depth and shared in forums and catalogued on the Moz Change history.

However, if you look at the latest updates from Moz there are no updates for the last 10 months. What is going on? Has Moz 'taken its eye off the ball' or has Google stopped announcing updates.

MOZ Products Blog About

Moz Pro Overview Features Pricing Resources

Google Algorithm Change History

Each year, Google changes its search algorithm around 500-600 times. While most of these changes are minor, Google occasionally rolls out a "major" algorithmic update (such as Google Panda and Google Penguin) that affects search results in significant ways.

For search marketers, knowing the dates of these Google updates can help explain changes in rankings and organic website traffic and ultimately improve search engine optimization. Below, we've listed the major algorithmic changes that have had the biggest impact on search.

Year	Update
2017	2017 Updates
2016	
2015	
2014	
2013	
2012	

"Fred" (Unconfirmed) — March 8, 2017

Google rolled out what appeared to be a major update, with reports of widespread impacts across the SEO community. Gary Illyes jokingly referred to it as "Fred", and the name stuck, but he later made it clear that this was not an official confirmation.

New, unconfirmed Google ranking update 'Fred' shakes the SEO world (SEL)

Did Google's Fred update hit low-value content sites that focus on revenue, not users? (SEL)

Well, it's probably a bit of both. Since Matt Cutts left Google in 2016, joining the US Government Digital Service, we have turned to new sources like [John Mueller](#) or [Gary Illyes](#) answering questions on Google+ Webmaster Hangouts or at conferences. Yet there does seem to be less transparency at Google to us.

This recent interview¹⁵ with Gary Illyes is wide-ranging and covers some of the latest developments, but highlights disagreements within Google about what should be disclosed and which features should be provided to help businesses via Google's SEO engineers. Here are the highlights:

- ✓ There is a 'Featured Snippets' algorithm that is being actively updated, this is important since changes to this can affect the top 10 search dynamics which can significantly change traffic.
- ✓ It is largely independent from Rankbrain which is also being updated to improve its

¹⁵ [Search Engine Land: 'Ask Me Anything' with Google's Gary Illyes at SMX East](#)

Machine Learning, based on historic search query data.

- ✓ The Panda 'penalty' is now part of the core algorithm and Google doesn't consider it as a penalty.
- ✓ The Penguin algorithm is separate and caution is given about disavowing the wrong type of site
- ✓ Google may include more data (one year), featured snippets or voice search data in Search Console, but no firm commitments have been given.

Our commentators differed on their views on the future importance of links and how Google assesses them. This commentary, from Alexandra Tachalova sharing her experience, shows the uncertainty:

"I keep seeing that domains with spammy backlink profiles are appearing in SERPs, staying for quite some time, and then disappearing. This means Google hasn't yet penalized such projects on the fly, and that's why they're able to rank well for quite some time. Technically if you have the time and SEO skills, you can analyse the 'rising star domains' that were able to perform well SERPs, and see where Google is deficient. From time to time, it's good to review the analysis, since you need to understand why one site ranks better than the others. Another important factor that all SEO experts should keep in mind is that the backlink profile has to be relevant to your business niche. By staying relevant to your industry links, you increase the quality of your backlink profile¹⁶ and start landing referral traffic that brings potential clients onboard".

Brand strength and the impact of PR and advertising

How to utilise your offline marketing to improve SEO

Google seeks to recommend the most trusted, relevant content to its users. For some time, it has used branded keyword searches and direct traffic as ranking factors. Matt Janaway highlights the importance of this. He explains:

"We analysed hundreds of Google Analytics accounts and found a direct correlation between the number of direct visits and the websites page position in search results. This conclusion aligns with other recent industry studies."



BEST PRACTICE TIP 5

Encourage brand searches.

Matt Janaway strongly recommends understanding how offline marketing and branding can impact your SEO performance. For example, if you run a TV campaign, ensure you tell viewers to search on Google with your brand name, as opposed to a generic keyword. This could indicate to Google that your domain and brand is more authoritative.

¹⁶ [Smart Insights Backlink audit quick win guide](#)

8 PAID SEARCH DEVELOPMENTS

Google AdWords specialists will know that Google has a more transparent approach to updating new AdWords features¹⁷ than for SEO, which is understandable as it directly supports their monetisation.

Within AdWords, over the past several years we have seen a mobile-first strategy in play where Google was seeking to protect its ad revenue as more users adopted smartphones. Initially enhanced campaigns were deployed and more recently, a range of ad extensions and bid adjustments have been released to give advertisers the flexibility to serve their ads in the correct context depending on the device, user location and previous interactions via different online placements.

At Google I/O this year, Google CEO Sundar Pichai announced an “important shift from a mobile-first to an AI-first world” at Google. This is reflected in the main trends in AdWords updates we have seen through 2017, which we can expect to continue into 2018. We categorise these changes as:

1. Increased Machine Learning AI options in AdWords. For some time now Google has sought to use analysis of historical ad data to better inform decisions. Sometimes these changes have been to support less sophisticated advertisers, for example optimising based on ‘Smart Goals’ or ‘Smart Bidding’ where the advertiser hasn’t set up their own business goals or completed their own bid adjustments. In other cases, the power of Machine Learning can be used on large scale campaigns to improve ROI, for example travel search site Trivago used Smart Display campaigns (which optimised targeting, bidding and over 25,000 ads on the display network).

2. Revised and new extensions. In 2017 Google’s Shopping extension which is critical to retailers has been revised. Linking to real-world local retail outlets through the ‘affiliate location extension’ has also been released in 3 countries so will roll out to other markets in 2018.

3. Improved experience and insight. AdWords practitioners will have seen the recent revised user interface. Improved insights, such as the ‘average time to convert’ report, are aimed at helping advertisers understand how their ad programmes fit with consumer behaviour, which is often complex, involving multiple interactions and devices through time. The Mobile Landing page report helps here too. More support for testing through Campaign Experiments supports marketers to ‘test and learn’. Finally, the launch by Google of its new attribution tool in 2018 deserves special mention.

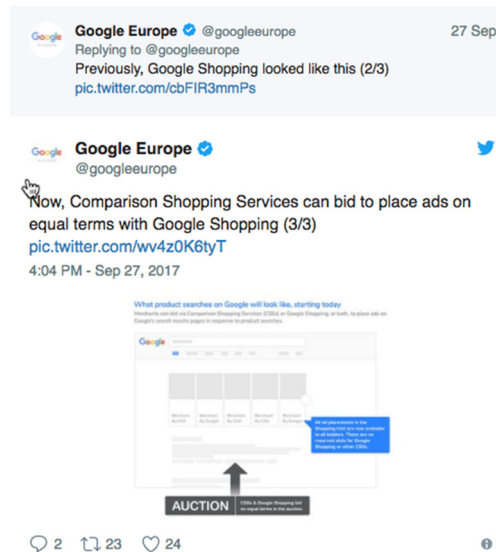
Bing are pursuing many of these innovations in PPC too, if Bing is important for your audience read this interview with James Murray of Bing¹⁸.

¹⁷ [New Google AdWords features](#)

¹⁸ [Smart Insights article Major trends to inform your search marketing actions in 2018 according to James Murray of Bing](#)

Google Shopping

This has grown in importance for retailers. Analysis by Merkle in the US shows that in Q4 2017, Shopping accounts for nearly 20% of all non-brand retail searches, so optimising this is crucial for retailers. Changes to Google Shopping will also be worth keeping a close eye on, in 2018, for the ramifications of the Google Antitrust fine in Europe which has recently seen them change the way their ads are displayed, to potentially give more prominence to other shopping engines in comparison. This tweet shows Google's limited results so far.



Google Attribution

You may have used Google's Attribution modelling tool or reviewed Assisted Conversions within Google Analytics. Watch out for a new attribution tool in 2018. Google Attribution is currently in Beta so we can anticipate that it will be rolled out in 2018.

This is particularly significant for AdWords, other paid media and social media since it will help businesses review and **credit upper- and mid-funnel interactions**, i.e. where someone searches for a generic product or service or follows a social share or ad and doesn't convert immediately, but on a later site visit, potentially on a different device, perhaps through a brand search or URL type-in.

Google Attribution is the simplified version of Attribution 360, a paid enterprise-level service whose features are based on Google's acquisition of multichannel attribution model solution Adometry. It integrates with Google Analytics, Google AdWords and DoubleClick Search and doesn't require any additional site tagging.

Using Attribution helps ensure AdWords isn't treated in isolation. Steve Masters highlights the importance of integrating AdWords and SEO:

“SEO and PPC complement each other. One cannot be done in the absence of the other. I like to explain it using the analogy of PR versus advertising in print publishing. You can send a press release to a newspaper or magazine and you have no say over whether it is used, how it is used or where it will appear in the publication (this is organic SEO). Or you can pay for an advertisement – you can design the page, specify where it will appear and when (this is PPC).

“The other difference between PPC and SEO is that, with PPC, you decide where someone will land when they click on your ad. With SEO, you are at the mercy of the search engine. With PPC you have control, with SEO you have influence.”

CONCLUSION

The eight key trends within this report all point to search marketing being a vital, dynamic part of marketing today, regardless of your business and the industry sector you work in.

At Smart Insights, we believe that success comes to those businesses who give search marketing the resources it warrants to grow the volume and quality of their organic and paid search. This requires a strategic, insight-driven approach put in place, with their agencies, the analysis, tools and review processes to continuously monitor, test and learn. The advent and implementation of AI and machine learning promise to support this insight-driven approach for those businesses which embrace them.

Regular auditing is essential, as one of our commentators, David Sayce points out:

'Whether it is advice for 2018 or 2008, I still believe in the power and the benefits available from a good audit. Okay perhaps the word 'audit' does not have the fun and excitement to it that other areas of digital marketing have, but for me this is the key foundation point for search marketing. I have never completed one that had not lead to visible improvements for the business, often over and above current marketing campaigns!

Decide what areas to focus on and consider the return on the investment, all too often I have found audits uncover issues that are simple to fix and have a significant impact on improving business. With any new client, an audit is often one of the very first steps suggested and one that can see the greatest return. The cost of an audit will depend on whether it's for an information based site or an Ecommerce based site. It's also going to depend on the size and complexity of situation as well.

Often audits to identify improvements are limited by specialists to one activity like user experience, content marketing, SEO or paid search. Our recommendation is that modern marketers deploy 360-degree content audits¹⁹ which review the impact of all of these aspects of audience engagement including search marketing in generating value for visitors and the business.

We're keen to learn from your questions and opinions of what works for SEO. Do join our free members' [Facebook group](#) to ask your questions or share your experiences related to this guide or other digital marketing opportunities.

[Dave Chaffey](#), December 2017

¹⁹ [Smart Insights: 10 reasons why you need a 360 degree content audit](#)