

Jon Colegate Ltd

A BUYERS GUIDE TO SEO

2nd October 2017



What you will get from this guide?

1. A clear, jargon free view of what you need to do in order improve your organic rankings in Google search.
2. A summarised understanding of how Google works and the main things they are looking for from your website.
3. How to weed out poor quality SEO services and time frames you can expect for results.
4. What you can expect to pay for SEO services and what to look for in a reputable agency or consultant.

Quick links:

- [So, how do you improve ratings?](#)
- [A buyers guide to link building.](#)
- [A buyers guide to producing great content.](#)
- [Do we have to do it this way?](#)



You can connect with Jon on:



About the author

Jon Colegate has worked on the frontline of search for almost **15 years** as practitioner, director of search, trainer, consultant and speaker:

1. Director Of Search, Ignition Search (Google Premium Partner).
2. Consultant & Advisor @ Jon Colegate Limited.
3. Lecturer for Business Link, HMRC, Universities & UK Business Associations.
4. Trainer for both public and private organisations.
5. Published author for The Entrepreneur & Certified Knowledge.

In this time Jon has helped many people gain more visibility in organic search and is a long term advocate of high quality SEO practices covering everything from accessibility and usability through to site architecture and content development.



So, how do you improve rankings?

As website owners, we all want to improve the visibility & traffic to our website. A huge amount of people rely on search engines to find information online, so it is vital to understand the key aspects of a successful strategy.

1.1 Ranking factors

Google has many ranking factors (200+) and this creates a pretty large puzzle for website owners to piece together. To add a layer of complexity, Google makes changes to its search algorithms pretty much daily.

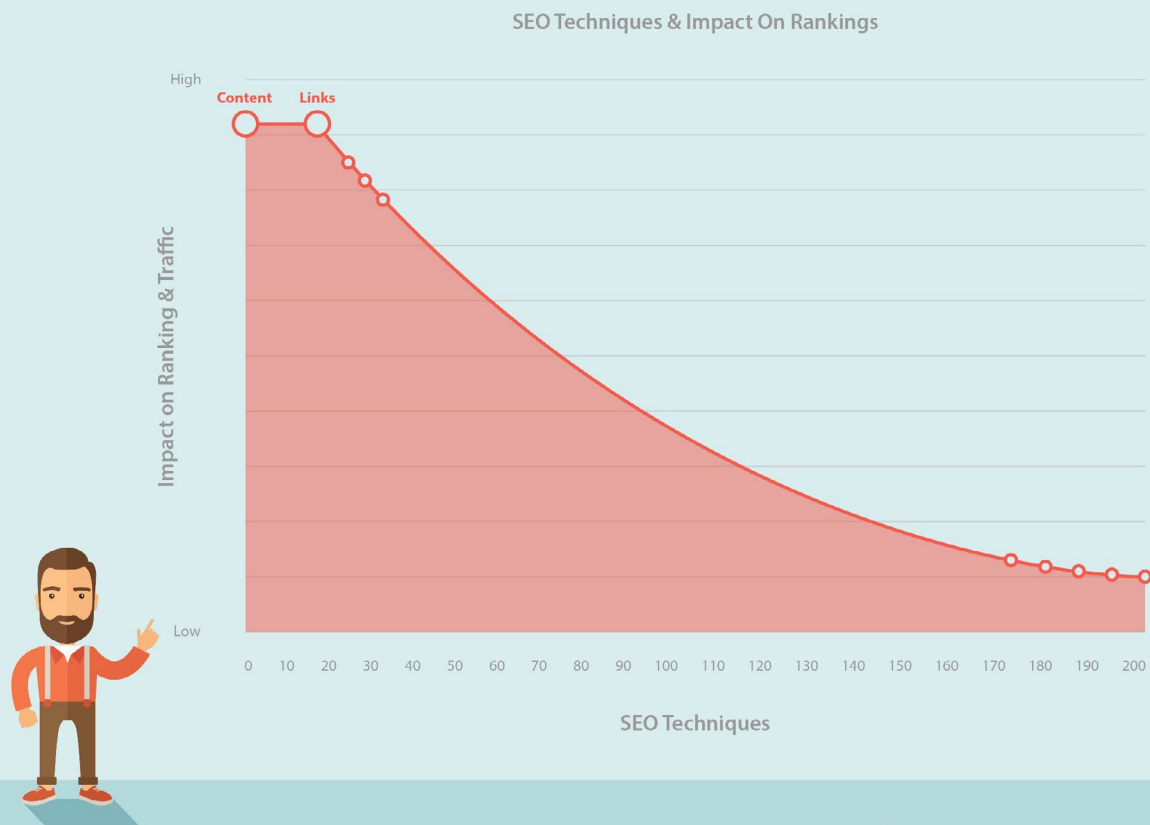
But here is the good news. Not all of these ranking factors are weighted equally.

What are the most important ranking factors then?



“I can tell you what they are. It’s content, and links pointing to your site.”

Andrey Lipattsev, Search Quality Senior Strategist at Google 2016



Andrey Lipattsev, Search Quality Senior Strategist at Google confirmed in a [2016 Q&A session](#) that Links & Content are the two most important ranking factors they use to determine rankings.

This has been a constant in fact for many years, with most SEO agency's focusing on building links to your site and creating content in order to achieve success. As buyers of SEO, this remains the primary way an agency will try and deliver results for you. The main things to consider can be summarised as follows:

- A) Google works hard to neutralise poor quality link building activities (more about this later) in an effort to protect itself. It primarily uses an algorithm named 'Penguin' in order to do this.
- B) Google wants content on your website to be of a high standard. Again, it works hard to weed out low quality content that won't help its users. It does this using numerous measurements with one of the best known being called 'Panda'.

C) Outdated SEO tactics will cause more harm than good. Google refers to this as 'web spam'.

As website owners, you therefore need to assess any SEO service using these core factors as a basis to measure the quality of service you will get.



Section 1

A Buyers Guide To Link Building

What are quality links?

Much of this actually comes down to common sense. The key things to consider here are as follows:

1. Is the link to your website coming from a website you are familiar with?
2. Is the linking website in the same or related industry to you?
3. Does the linking website have a clear association to your products & services, is it editorially controlled and has its own readership?
4. Does the link offer a realistic chance to grow your brand awareness or increase your sales?

If the answer to the above questions is generally 'no', then it is likely you are looking at web spam.

Web spam is a vast subject and beyond the scope of this guide. If you would like to learn more about the sort of techniques SEO agencies abuse when trying to rank websites – try this [really useful guide on Spamflag](#).

When buying SEO services, ask for past examples of link building work. If it doesn't meet the 'common sense' check list above, you are most likely dealing with a poor quality SEO agency.

How many links do I need?

This is a commonly asked question which has no real answer. As a rule of thumb you are looking to consistently build quality, relevant links to your website. If you align this work with a content strategy, you should start to see traffic growth and improvements in visibility.

Does Google penalise poor links?

Google has targeted low quality SEO work for many years. In 2012, it upped the anti considerably by introducing a new algorithm called 'Penguin'. This actively penalised websites that had been caught:

- A) Using software to build links rather than editorially identifying good websites to partner with.
- B) Using easy to obtain links via guest posts, comments, blogspots, article syndication, paid for links and a range of other dubious strategies.
- C) Trying to fake the importance of client websites, often without the consent or knowledge of the client.

The net effect of this - severe ranking drops, lost revenue and a large clean-up operation for many many websites. More recently (late 2016) Google has introduced real time Penguin. This is a more intelligent update that identifies and devalues poor quality links in real-time. Rather than penalise, this latest version simply discounts them.

In 2017, if your SEO agency aren't building high quality links through innovative and useful content – they will be largely wasting their time and your money.

This will force many SEO agencies to change their approach. As a buyer, you would be advised to check how this will affect your campaign as you don't want to be the fall guy for an agency learning new tactics on your time and money.

How do I check the links my agency has built?

If you have concerns, then ask your agency for a full list of the links they have been building to your website. A list of these may be in your monthly reports but if not, then ask your account manager for a detailed list.

Are my existing rankings under threat?

If you have used SEO services over the past 2 years or so, then you may have enjoyed something of a honeymoon. In the new era of Penguin 4.0, if you or someone on your behalf has used poor quality approaches, you may start to find these links stop adding value.

In the new era of Penguin 4.0, if you or someone on your behalf has used poor quality approaches in the past 18 months, you may start to find these links stop adding value and traffic may drop.

The way to check this is to view your Google Analytics data and look at your organic traffic profile. If you are noticing a declining picture, then it could be indicative of Penguin 4.0 filtering out your links.

If you have primarily have used sensible approaches to building links such as genuine PR, your investment should be fine for the longer term.

How many links should I expect per month?

Don't spend time on this. It is commonly asked but your agency will spend time researching opportunities as well as producing content. This effort can take time and you may have to wait for results to start coming through. If after a few months, you believe progress has been slow, then request a meeting with your SEO agency to discuss progress.

If you are getting lots of links very quickly, then this may be a spam flag. Often lower quality links are easier to obtain and can often be automated.

What are the best ways to get quality links?

Your content basically has to be very good to get links. You also need to have done your homework upfront and found out what editors, influencers and publishers would be keen to promote. When buying SEO services, you need to be confident that the agency can truly do this. In our experience, it takes years to fully develop the requisite skills to research, produce and outreach high quality content.

Proven techniques that help:

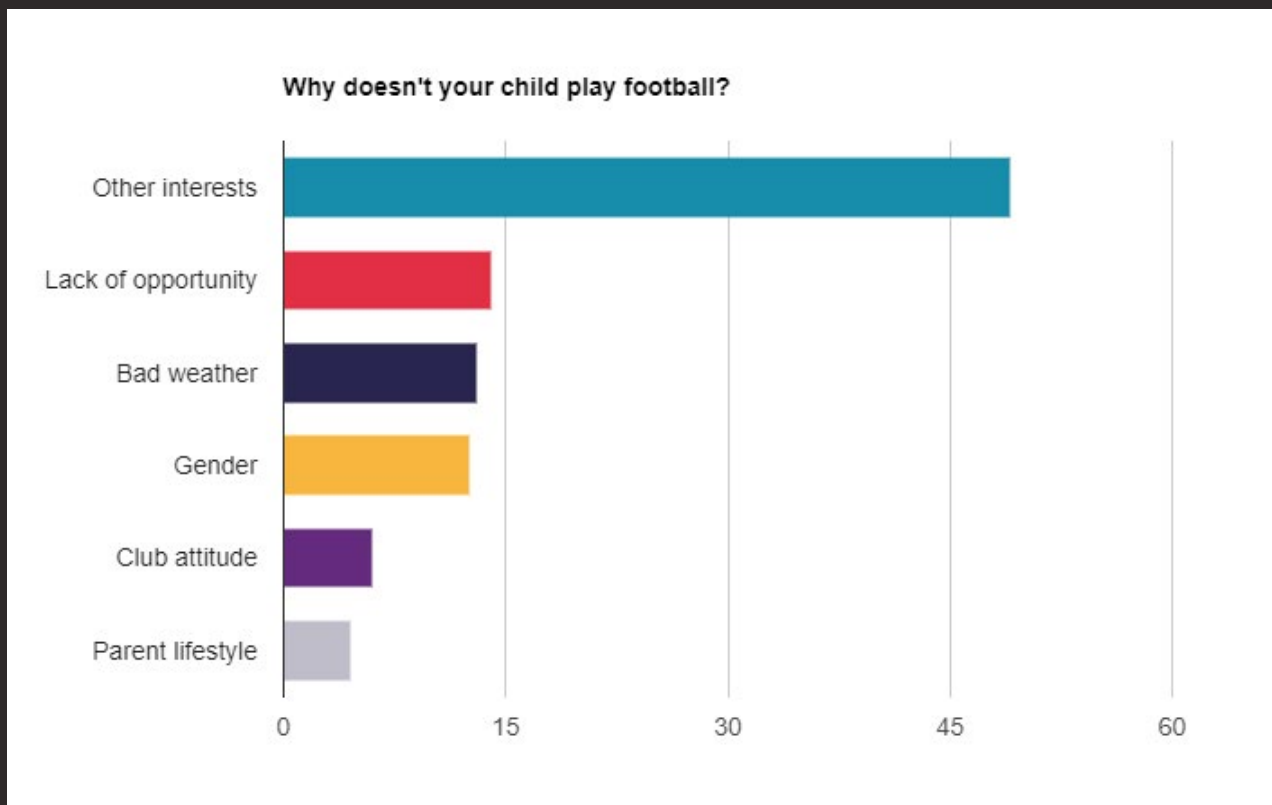
- PR – direct to news desks, journalists etc.
- Original Research
- Guides & Whitepapers
- 'How To' and Tutorials
- Multimedia – Video, Podcasts etc.
- Image Gallery's
- Expert Content – Reviews, Interviews, Comparisons, Illustrations etc.
- Niche Directory's

It can take years to develop the skills needed to research, produce and outreach high quality content

What Is Link Worthy Content?

Broadly speaking your chosen agency will need to demonstrate they have the skills and resources to produce link worthy content.

Try looking at some of the content we have produced as an idea on the depth and standard you are ideally aiming for.



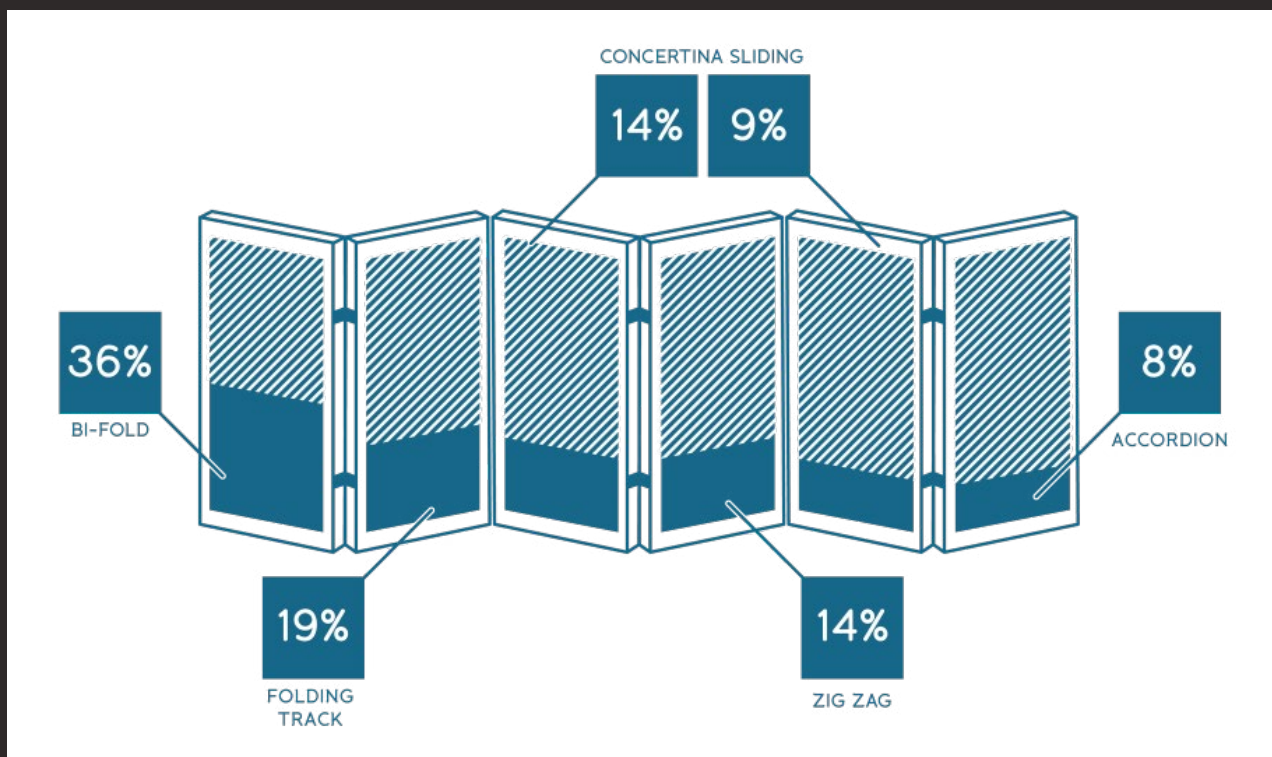
<https://www.kitlocker.com/teamzone/parents-offer-views-on-why-their-children-dont-play-football/>

Summary

This work looked into the issues around why children may not play football. We were interested in learning whether poor conditions impacted participation. Our client provides football teamwear for grassroots teams.

The work was picked up and linked to by:

- Pitchero
- Soccerplanet.com
- FcBusiness



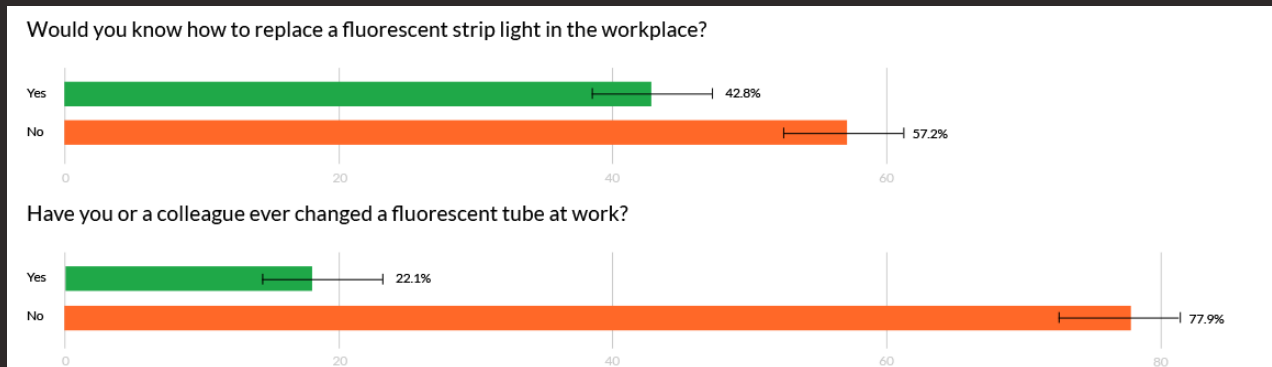
<https://origin-global.com/advice-centre/bi-fold-door-name-mix-up-means-websites-lose-thousands-of-visitors-every-month>

Summary

What do people call a bifold door? This original research looked into the terminology used by people who were looking for bifolds, but used other language in order to describe the product.

The work was picked up and linked to by:

- Building Talk
- Door Industry Journal
- Windows & Doors
- Showhouse
- Fenesta
- The Double Gazing Blog



<https://www.lampshoponline.com/advice/employees-admit-to-changing-fluorescent-tubes-despite-safety>

Summary

This work looked into the attitudes in smaller businesses towards office lighting and specifically staff having to change faulty fluorescent tubes directly. The issue highlighted a sloppy attitude towards staff safety and best practices around disposal.

The work was picked up and linked to by:

- Lighting Insight
- Electrical Trade Magazine
- FMIndustry
- Facilities Net



Section 2

A Buyers Guide To Producing Great Content

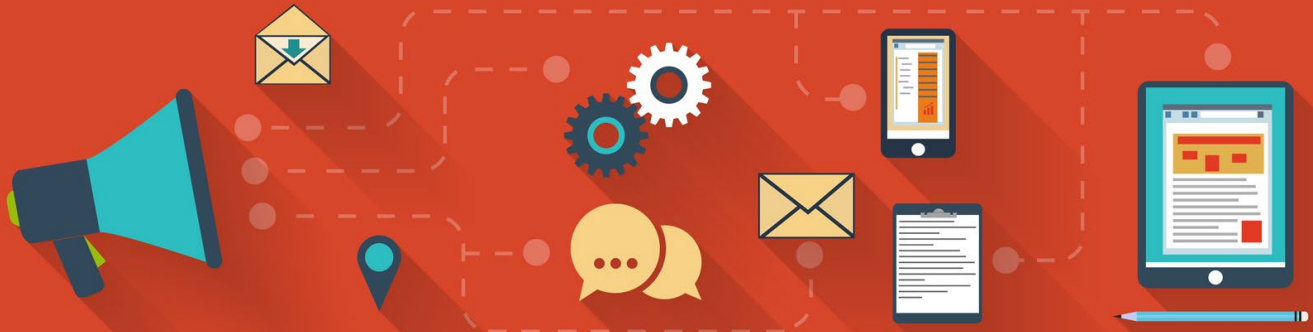


Image from - <https://www.extreme-creations.co.uk/blog/3-leading-examples-of-content-marketing/>

Introduction – The Rise Of Expert Content

We have seen a significant shift in recent times towards higher quality content being a prerequisite of increasing organic visibility. This has come from a wide range of initiatives:

A) Google introduced the Panda filter. This started life as a series of regular updates to the index which subsequently became part of the core algorithm itself. Primarily Panda is **designed to filter out low quality websites** that are guilty, amongst other things of:

- Writing 'thin' content that is essentially written for search engines, not people.
- Duplicating, overlapping or copying subjects found elsewhere online with little added value.
- Poorly presenting content in terms of spelling and grammar.
- Failing to cover subjects in depth, essentially leaving visitors without the answers they crave.

- B) Hummingbird. Google introduced this initiative to help them get behind the intent of user search. Hummingbird, introduced in 2013 gives more attention to each word in a query, ensuring that the whole is taken into account. Hummingbird tries to understand the intent and context behind user search queries. This was a significant move into Semantic Search, and the beginning of the end for more traditional information retrieval methodology.
- C) Quality Raters. Google Uses Quality Raters and split testing to improve its algorithms for years. Specifically, Quality Raters have been tasked with marking web pages as either high or low quality based on criteria set by Google. First **published in November 2015**, these guidelines act as a framework for any serious SEO agency.



“If you are wondering why Google is doing something, often the answer is to make it look more like the human rater guidelines”

Paul Haahr, Software Engineer, Google – [SMX West 2016](#)

- D) Answer Boxes (Featured Snippets) began appearing in search results over the last couple of years to directly answer visitor queries. The information powering these results comes directly from web pages in the Google index. The easier you make it for Google to get this info, the more chance you have of getting extra traffic. Specifically HTML mark-up can play a key role in helping Google.

Here is how featured snippets look in action for our client Swann-Morton:

Google search results for "what is a 10 blade".

Search query: what is a 10 blade

Results: About 40,400,000 results (0.58 seconds)

Featured Snippet:

Surgical Scalpel **Blade No.10**. Print Product Range PDF. The No. **10 blade** with its curved cutting edge is one of the more traditional **blade** shapes and is used generally for making small incisions in skin and muscle.

[Surgical Scalpel Blade No.10. Swann-Morton Ltd](https://www.swann-morton.com/product/16.php)

<https://www.swann-morton.com/product/16.php>

Image: A close-up photograph of a surgical scalpel blade being held by a gloved hand.

Buttons: About this result, Feedback

Google search results for "how to fit a surgical blade".

Search query: how to fit a surgical blade

Results: About 372,000 results (0.74 seconds)

Featured Snippet:

Use the following procedure to attach a surgical blade:

1. Grip blade with forceps, or similar, avoiding contact with cutting edge.
2. Hold handle in left hand with bayonet fitting uppermost.
3. Place blade partway over handle fitting and engage slots.
4. Slide blade until it clicks into position.

More items...

[Safe Handling of Swann-Morton Products](https://www.swann-morton.com/view_reading.php?reading_id=1)

https://www.swann-morton.com/view_reading.php?reading_id=1

Image: A diagram illustrating the steps to attach a surgical blade to a handle. It shows the blade being inserted into the handle and then slid into position.

Buttons: About this result, Feedback

E) Google Knowledge Graph. Google has continued to push the boundaries of entity search and has grown and grown its database of known entities through its own endeavours and through acquisition of entity libraries such as Freebase (23 million). Coined 'From strings to things' entity search enables Google to further develop its understanding of how people, places, brands, plants & animals all relate to each other.




Horse
Animal

The horse is one of two extant subspecies of *Equus ferus*. It is an odd-toed ungulate mammal belonging to the taxonomic family Equidae.
[Wikipedia](#)

Lifespan: 25 – 30 years
Gestation period: 11 – 12 months
Mass: 380 – 1,000 kg (Adult)
Speed: 40 – 48 km/h (Gallop)
Height: 1.4 – 1.8 m (Adult, At the withers)


Did you know: Horses were too expensive, and they needed better quality food than oxen. [quatr.us](#)

Breeds [View 20+ more](#)



Belgian horse Clydesdale horse Percheron Thoroughbred Arabian horse

Feedback



Sheffield
City in England

Sheffield is a city in the English county of South Yorkshire. In the city centre, the Millennium Gallery shows metalwork and art from Sheffield and around the world. It adjoins the Winter Garden, a large temperate glasshouse filled with plants. Kelham Island Museum covers the city's industrial heritage. The nearby countryside is part of Peak District National Park, characterised by moorland and rocky ridges.

Area: 367.9 km²
Weather: 13°C, Wind W at 6 mph (10 km/h), 83% Humidity
Area code: 0114
Local time: Sunday 21:07

Plan a trip

- Sheffield travel guide
- 3-star hotel averaging £70
- Upcoming Events

Colleges and Universities: [University of Sheffield](#), [Sheffield Hallam University](#), [The Sheffield College](#)

[More about Sheffield](#)

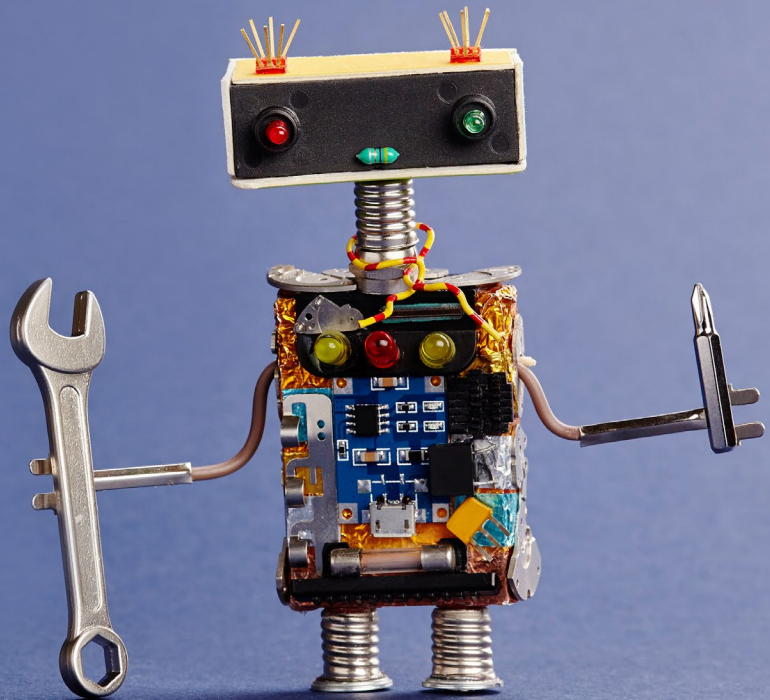
Feedback

- F) UX Updates aka Phantom Update(s). Little is known about these updates apart from industry commentators started noticing specific core ranking changes outside of specific Panda release dates. Dubbed 'Phantom' these appear to be targeting sites that have a poor user experience. In our own work we have seen large traffic improvements after redesigning client websites (to give them a better UX focus). Our own view is that Google is rewarding higher quality websites – specifically those that focus on key aspects of a good user experience.
- G) Rank Brain. Google unleashed Rankbrain and declared it the 3rd most important ranking factor behind content and links. Details on this technology is still emerging but it is true AI & appears to be learning what users found useful and what they didn't. This then influences what we see in the SERPS.



“The keyword itself is no longer the decisive factor in determining the actual ranking for a search query. Our analysis shows how strongly the relevance of the content to the search intention influences the Google ranking”

Rebooting Ranking Factors, SearchMetrics 2016

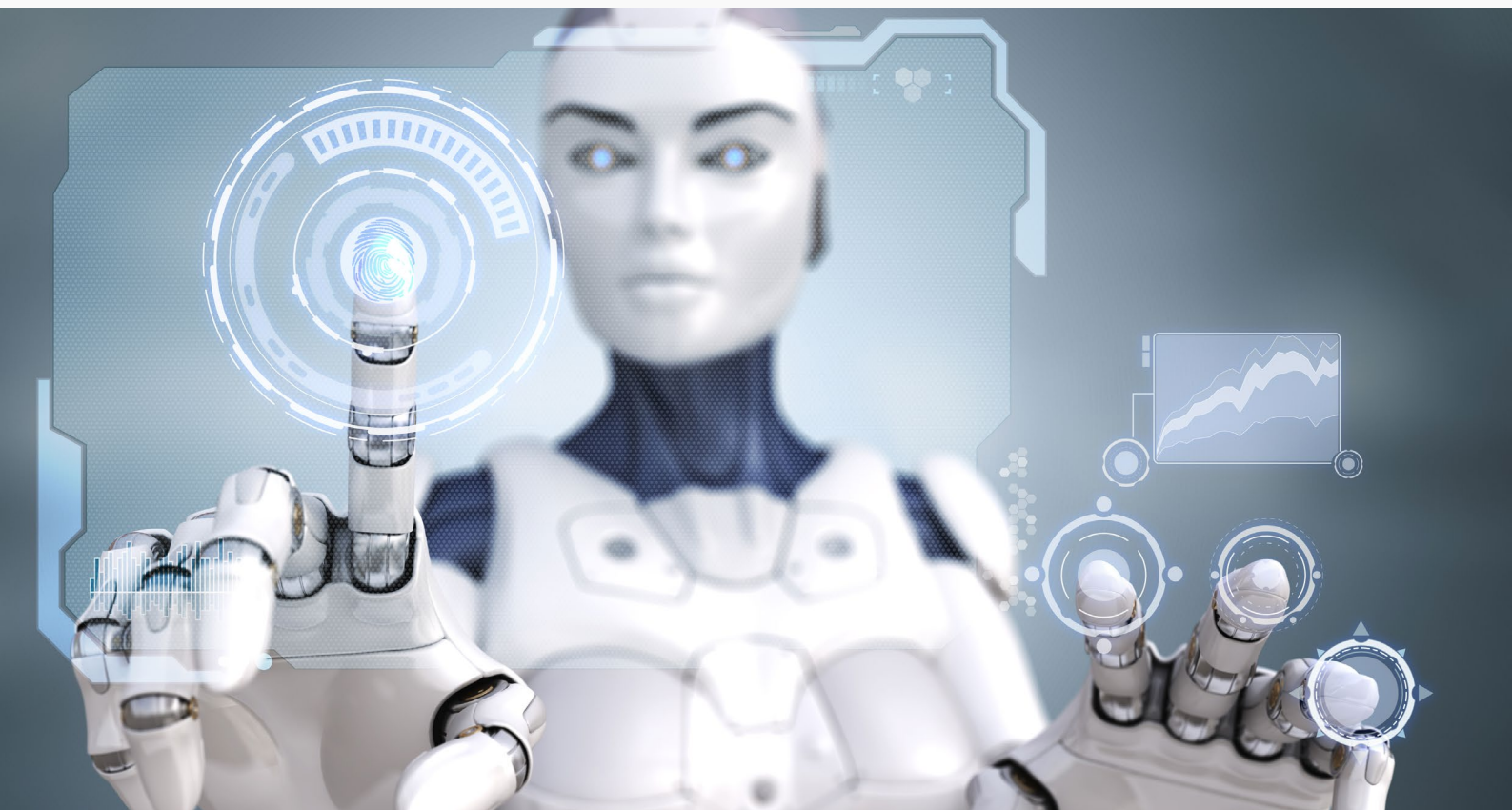


What does this mean in 2017?

In years gone by and in truth it still happens today, website owners and SEO agency's would write generic blog style articles that were produced because it was deemed helpful to the SEO effort. These articles shared similar characteristics:

- A) They were often keyword focused or had little direct relevance to clients products and services.
- B) They were often very thin and lacked depth. Short on useful information and help to anyone that read them.
- C) They were made to be indexed by Google and not read.

Fast forward to 2017...



Google is now far more advanced, ready to reward expert content and similarly ignore or even penalise low quality SEO efforts. You must now:

- A) Write in-depth around your subject.
- B) Answer peoples questions fully.
- C) Produce and link to related content visitors may find helpful to their research.
- D) Make content easy to read, digest and share.
- E) Encourage visitors to stay on your website through good UX and conversion best practices.

If you fail to do this, you are likely to find the content is marked down algorithmically.

The good news here is that its quite easy to assess the quality of content a prospective SEO agency will deliver for you. If you take a look through past client work, you will be able to assess whether they write for people or search engines.

Here are some examples of content we have written. Judge this against the standard of work being proposed.

- <http://www.graysons.co.uk/wills-estates-trusts/intestacy-rules/>
- <https://www.russums-shop.co.uk/news/knives/q/date/2017/09/05/wusthof-knives-faqs>
- <https://www.jacksonwoodturners.co.uk/planning-advice/guide-to-spindles>

Even today we see SEO professionals failing to get past the basics on content production. **Be careful and avoid working with a Dinosaur agency.**



What Should We Avoid?

As discussed earlier in this guide, content has to be produced that meets user expectations. A common old school practice is to write generic content 'because we need to write content' for SEO. The characteristics of this content are quite easy to spot:

- A) The blog posts /articles are often unrelated and disjointed from each other, culminating in a large library of generic content that acts as a magnet to algorithmic filters.
- B) The blog posts / articles don't focus on user issues and are often 'glossy' in nature without ever covering a subject in depth.
- C) The blog posts / articles are keyword heavy and offer little by way of insight and depth of knowledge.

This sort of approach is still very prevalent. Be careful and if you are already under contract, have a good look through the content that has been written. Does it really help users? Will it ever appear in featured snippets? Or has it simply been written to flesh out your blog and act as a deliverable by the agency?

Bad UX Hurts Great Content – But Does Your SEO Agency Know It?



“Our data shows that the Time on Site has risen, compared with our first user signal analysis in 2014. On average, users spend more than three minutes (190 seconds) on the top-ranking URL, which is around the same as the average Time on Site for all URLs on the first page of results”

Rebooting Ranking Factors, SearchMetrics 2016

As well as the actual quality of content, you must also now focus on its presentation. It is a fact that a high percentage of people will skim read, with many not making it to the bottom of the page at all. Some don't make it past the headline. You must therefore focus on tactics to keep people interested in the content.

If users are put off reading your content, a lot of effort has been wasted.

In the content examples we gave above, notice how the reader gets a good idea of what they are going to get out of the page, the content is easy to scan and avoids clunky blocks of text, poor line spacing and font legibility.

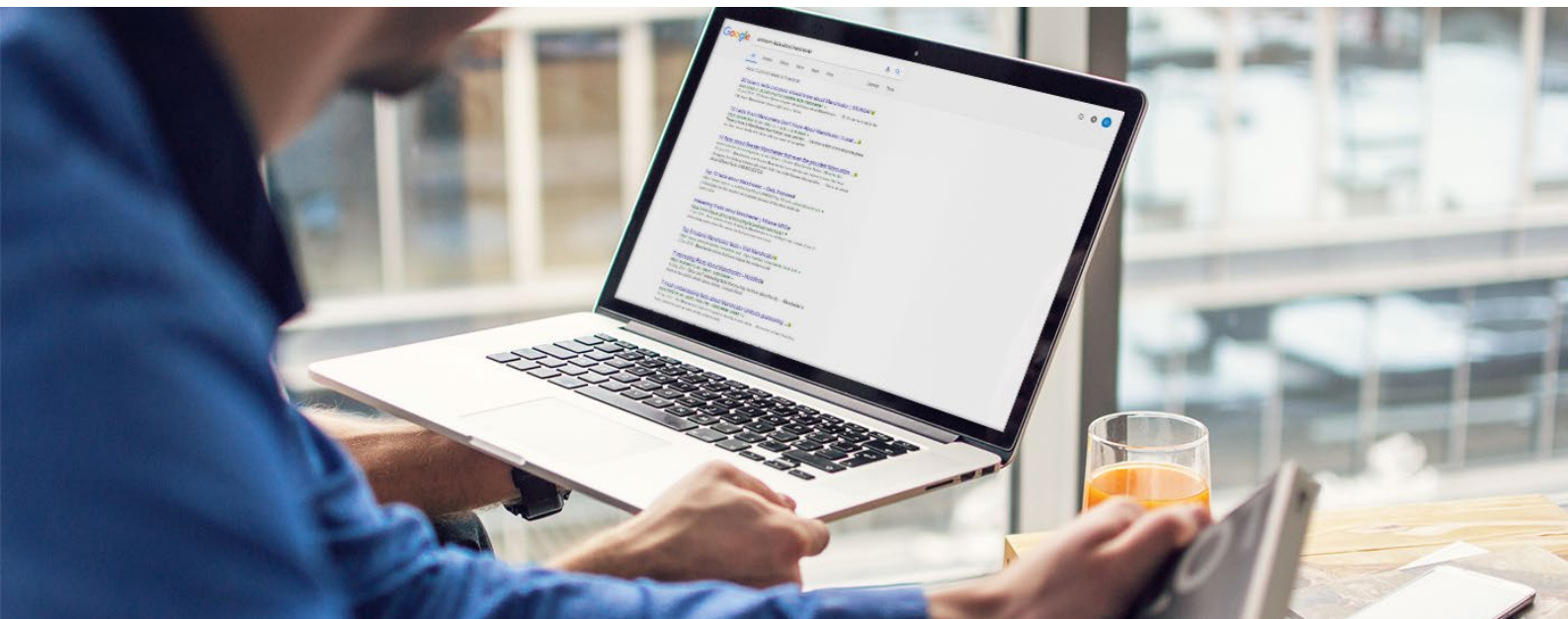
“

“Users won’t read web content unless the text is clear, the words and sentences are simple, and the information is easy to understand”

Nielsen Norman Group

It is crucial your SEO agency understands as a minimum the basics of good UX in content.

Only 20-25% of people will make it to the bottom of the page. Good UX will assist them.



“

“If you don’t consider the user experience (UX) when people are reading your content, you are increasing the chances of high bounces and low time on site. Neither are desirable in 2017”

Nielsen Norman Group

So Does UX Matter for SEO?

“

“2016 saw a marked increase in the use of structured elements like lists and bullet points that create an improved user experience”

Rebooting Ranking Factors, SearchMetrics 2016

Studies from leading data providers such as SearchMetrics suggest it does. Our own (albeit limited studies) would agree. We have found:

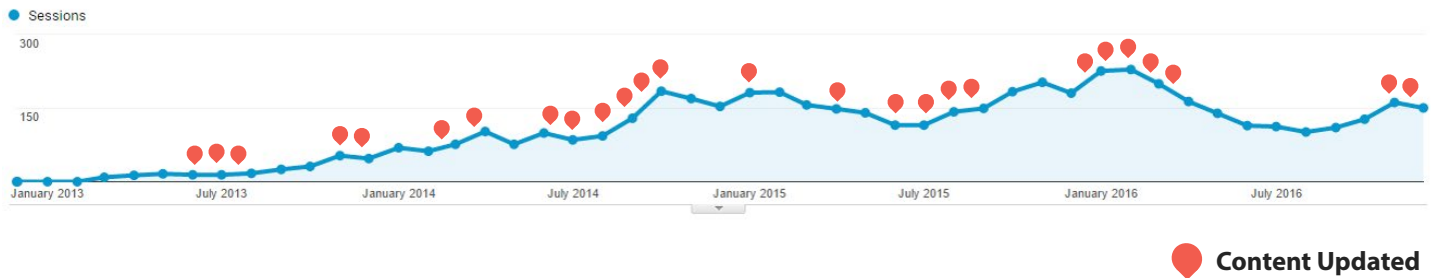
- A) Conversion & UX focused web redesigns have enjoyed marked increases in organic search traffic. So much so we have now bundled our web design fees in with our SEO work.
- B) The general standard of UX in web pages in high ranking pages has increased dramatically over the past 18 months.
- C) Better use of HTML mark up (such as lists, tables etc.) has increased the chances of our clients featuring in Answer boxes.

We would go back to earlier comments – it is essential you work with an agency that can demonstrate they are focusing on UX in their work. Ask them to provide recent content work on client sites and judge for yourself:

- A) Is it easy to read?
- B) Do they use large blocks of text on a regular basis?
- C) Does the user get a good idea what they will get from the content without having to read it all?
- D) Is key information well sign posted?
- E) Does the content link to other relevant content on the subject?

Freshness – Good Content Needs Updating FACT

As a general rule of thumb, your content strategy should lend itself to regular updates. Here is the analytics graph from one of our clients web pages on Craftknives.co.uk. This happened in truth by chance. We didn't expect to see such a steady increase but it was a nice surprise.



You can see that the page updates tend to coincide with traffic increases. Yes the page has grown over time (and would naturally attract more traffic) but the largest periods of inactivity have also mapped roughly with the most consistent drop in traffic.

We see this on a reasonably consistent basis – the more frequently we update content, the better results tend to be. Our team make freshness a part of our daily work and our expert content work perfectly fits with this strategy.

“

“25. Recency of Content Updates: Google Caffeine update favours recently updated content, especially for time-sensitive searches”

<http://backlinko.com/google-ranking-factors>

What About The Other Ranking Factors?

There are many other ranking factors to consider but these are beyond the scope of this buyers guide. We just wanted to focus on the main 2 and give you an idea of what to look for in a good service. Generally speaking these are more technical considerations and we would recommend you ask any prospective agency:

- A) How much web development experience they have (for dealing with considerations such as site speed improvements).
- B) What security expertise they possess – specifically for dealing with HTTPS and site security issues.
- C) What server side skills they have. Specifically server admin.

What Other Factors Should We Consider In Our Decision?

Agency Depth / Specialisms

Is Search the primary activity of the agency you are planning to use? Often design agency's focus on other areas primarily (such as web design) and search accounts for a small percentage of turnover. In this case, how sure are you they have the skills, time and experience to get the results for you?

Google Partners

There are NO Google accredited SEO agency's. If a Google partner badge is included in any presentation or pitch, it will relate to Google Adwords. Although it is a good overall signal and fine in an Adwords pitch of course, it counts for little in terms of SEO. Be careful this accreditation is not being abused.

SEO Budgets

When it comes to budgets, you will find a huge range of fee structures on offer. Some start from under £500 rising to around £5,000 per month. At the lower end of the scale, you may struggle to get the professional support discussed in this guide when hiring an agency. In truth you are more likely to find the work is semi automated. If you work with a consultant, then there is potential to get the work done at lower prices to a good standard.

Unsolicited Approaches

Probably the worst aspect of the industry is the number of unsolicited approaches that go on day in day out. Our general recommendation is to ignore them and approach agency's when you are ready to do so. The types of approach vary in terms of sophistication but nonetheless they are all unsolicited.

Free Reports & Data

These are often unsolicited but look more convincing. An agency may offer to conduct a free review or contact you to highlight traffic 'drop's via their own data sources. In our experience these data sources, however good they look, are often substantially inaccurate and should be treated with scepticism.

Warning: Many free reviews report on a blizzard of technical issues. They can look frightening to clients but be careful, many issues reported may be minor issues and not make much difference to your overall success.

Performance Tracking

We recommend you use Google Analytics to assess performance independently of the agency. The key analytics reports can be found:

- Behaviour > Landing Pages (must be filtered for Organic only)
- Acquisition > Campaigns > Organic Keywords

In terms of progress, initially you are looking for solid groundwork being done in the first month of the project. Any technical work should be completed in the first 2 months of the project and your content strategy should be up and running by month 2.

From there it is a case of measuring the quality of output. By month 4-5 the project should be making a difference to traffic and enquiries, however this will vary from project to project depending upon how good or bad shape the website was in to begin with.

If you are in any doubt or feel that the campaign is under performing, have a chat with your account manager where any issues can be dealt with.

What Else Can We Use To Select The Right Agency?

Past Results

As we often say, this is a results business and the main thing to consider is whether the agency can demonstrate a back catalogue of successful projects. Be warned however - short term successes were easier before Penguin 4.0. If you have a requirement for short term traffic – then Adwords is probably a better option for you.

Testimonials & Case Studies

No agency will offer you testimonials from unhappy clients, so again be warned on this front. % increase claims should also be viewed with caution – a 50% increase in organic traffic sounds great in a case study but if originally the site was only getting 100 visits a month, then the increase is nothing to shout about.

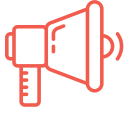
Where possible always deal in real numbers. We started with X visits – and ended with X.

UX Focused

As you have read, UX is becoming a key battleground for SEO. You must choose an agency that truly understands web usability.

Longevity

Certainly in our region, we have seen many practioners come and go. We have been on an improvement path since 2003. Longevity means experience and most importantly we give clients an honest and realistic expectation of what they should expect from our work.



Do we have to do it this way?

No you don't.

This guide should be viewed as an overview of the main factors we consider to be important. Our approach is to focus on the big issues Google really cares about and specifically ones that you absolutely can contribute to.

You may find other agency's want to focus more on technical improvements or focus on very creative content that is designed to go viral. In our opinion though, this type of approach lacks context, however brilliant the work may be. Technical improvements are also great, but we would consider them the icing on the cake, but not the cake.

Finally, a few things for you to consider before you choose a supplier...

Hope you found this useful and good luck with your project!



“Beware of SEOs that claim to guarantee rankings, allege a “special relationship” with Google, or advertise a “priority submit” to Google”

[Search Engine Optimisation \(SEO\) Webmasters Help](#)

How long will it take to see results?



“In most cases, the SEO will need four months to a year to help your business first implement improvements and then see potential benefit”

How to Hire an SEO, Maile Ohye, Develop Program Tech Lead