



Why Search & SEO

Go Hand in Hand



Content

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In 2009, Bill Gates gave a speech at a private dinner where he famously said “the future of search is verbs.”

Gates wasn't talking about the words people type into search boxes, he was instead talking about why people search.

Before we can understand why search is important, we need to take a step back and understand why people search.

Why People Search

In the early days, people searched to find a list of documents that contained the words they typed in. That's no longer the case.

Today's searchers search to solve problems, to accomplish tasks, and to “do” something. They might be searching to book a flight, buy something, learn the latest Taylor Swift lyrics, or browse cat photos – but these are all actions. Or, as Gates referred to them, verbs.

When a user starts a search, they're really starting a journey. Marketers love to talk about something called “the consumer journey.” It's just a fancy way of referencing a user's path from the inception of their task to the completion – and most of these journeys start with a search.



The consumer journey has been gradually playing a larger role in search over the last decade. Originally depicted as a funnel wherein users move from awareness to consideration to purchase, this old consumer journey has become outdated (although we still use this model for illustrative purposes and to make persona research easier).

The Evolution of Search & the Consumer Journey

The modern consumer journey no longer represents a funnel, but looks more like a crazy straw – with various twists and turns representing the various channels, mediums, and devices that users interact with today.

In order to fit this new model, search has had to evolve from simply words on the page to understanding the user intent at each phase of the journey. Search is no longer just about keywords, but has evolved into providing the right content to the right user at the right time in their journey to help them accomplish their task.

For the users, it's all about the verbs. For search marketers, it's all about helping the user on their journey (and, ideally, influencing them a bit along the way.)

Sticking with the crazy straw model, today's consumer journey no longer happens on a single device. Users may



start a search on their mobile device, continue researching on their tablet or work laptop, and ultimately purchase from their desktop at home.

Search isn't just limited to computers or phones. Users can now search from a variety of devices, including watches, smart glasses, Bluetooth speaker assistants, and even kitchen appliances. In today's world, even my fridge has its own Twitter account – and search marketers need to be cognizant of how various devices relate to each other and play a part in a user's search experience.

There's some healthy debate as to whether this has always been the case, but in today's always on hyper-connected world, SEO has morphed into what we'll call "real marketing."

Gone are the days of hacks, tricks, and attempting to reverse-engineer algorithms.

Today's SEO focuses on:

- Understanding personas.
- Data-driven insights.
- Content strategy.
- Technical problem-solving.

The 3 Main Tenants of Any Marketing Strategy or Campaign



Search touches all three of these areas:

1. Attract.
2. Engage.
3. Convert.

But search concentrates heavily on the first phase:
Attract.

“If you build it, they will come” may apply to baseball fields, but it doesn’t work with websites.

It’s no longer enough to have an awesome product. You must actively attract customers via multiple channels and outlets. This is why, despite some claims to the contrary from clients or design agencies, every webpage is, in fact, an SEO page.

If a webpage is involved in attracting visitors, engaging visitors, or converting them, there should be an important SEO component to that page.

OK, users, journey, search, verbs – got it. Users are important and many of them start with a search, so search is important.

But why is SEO important? Isn’t SEO just a developer thing? I heard there was a plugin for it. Can’t Google and Bing just figure out my website?

We started this story with a Gates quote, but it was Google rather than Microsoft that took the philosophy to heart.



Things like **Hummingbird, Panda, Penguin, RankBrain, Mobilegeddon**, Possum, Pigeon, entities, and AMP essentially have all been attempts by Google to adapt its search algorithm to move from words to actions – and help users accomplish whatever tasks they may be focused on – but they aren't that simple to understand.

SEO has come a long way from the days of meta data. Sure, there's a lot of best practices involved that “should” be covered by the development team or a plugin (or built into a framework *cough cough* angular, react, I'm looking at you guys) – but often they aren't.

Today's websites are more application than they are a website, and applications come with lots of fancy features that don't always play nicely with search engines (hi again, angular and react.)

Good SEO Practices

A good SEO can not only focus on content, but also help:

- Navigate through multiple versions of the same page.
- Solve tech issues that render content invisible to search engines.
- With proper server settings.
- Integrate with social media, content, creative, user experience, paid search, or analytics.
- Find ways to speed up your site.



A good SEO professional not only understands the searcher, but the competitive landscape as well. It isn't enough to just understand the user's task, search marketers need to understand what other options are in the marketplace, and how they can fill the gap to provide a better solution for the user's task.

We've come a long way from keywords on pages to full-service marketing. SEO pros get to wear multiple hats as they help connect development, information architecture, user experience, content strategy, marketing, social, and paid media teams. It's a game of give and take – all in an attempt to create something that works for search engines and users.

There are plenty of cautionary tales about things as simple sounding as a site redesign or new CMS system causing a site's traffic to drop or disappear leaving businesses scrambling. The simple fact of the matter is, most website changes these days affect SEO – and only by including SEO up front and throughout the project can a business hope to see positive results.

So Why Is Search Important?

Search matters because users matter. As technology continues to evolve, SEOs will constantly deal with new ways of searching, new devices to search on, and new types of searches (like voice search, or



searches done by my oven) but the one thing that will remain constant is why people search. The verbs aren't going away.

One day we might be overrun by AI or upload our consciousness into the singularity – but until then we'll still need to solve problems and accomplish tasks – and some form of search will always be involved in that.