

Five SEO Mistakes Your Content Writers Made Today

In another era, marketing was an exercise to tap into the unconscious. Content decisions were made by suited men engaged in philosophical conversation around a conference table, fogged over by tobacco exhaust and inspired by another round of amber liquor. Ideas were affirmed or dismissed for how they touched the intuition of an executive. Television has made it easy to envision the final verdict: With Don Draper-like panache, the top man announces his decision in a confident flourish, punctuating his point with a knowing draw on a stubby cigarette.

This darkly romanticized portrait unwound with the growth of scientific research—public opinion polls, focus groups, and the like—which first acted as a counterweight, then a primary driver, of marketing decisions. The hazy conference rooms gradually cleared, and conversations shifted from how executives felt about ideas to how their potential customers expressed feelings from the mirrored side of one-way glass.

The early days of the Internet pushed the boundaries further still, with search engine analytics that made representative samples seem hopelessly narrow. Now every combination of words every potential consumer entered into Google or Yahoo! could be evaluated for its correlation with purchasing decisions. Computer science majors became marketing stars, exploiting immaturities in search algorithms to stock sites with unwieldy and unreadable content that, nonetheless, drove search rank and sales.

Yet the landscape has shifted again. Artificial intelligence has become, well, intelligent, and content has regained its throne. What do your content writers know about search engine optimization? If their knowledge hasn't kept pace with search, they're writing to please ancient algorithms, tanking your search rank and losing you customers. Here are five mistakes they made today:

1. They wrote pre-Panda content.

Google released its Panda Update in February 2011. In short, the update punished creators of weak content—the keyword-stuffed, plagiarized, and sometimes spam-like jumble of words that offered consumers nothing, except a guarantee that your page would rank well. Panda represented a shift away from analytics-driven content and toward analytics-conscious content. Google's Hummingbird Update in 2013 took the process a step further, valuing synonyms as a stand-in for keywords.

Highly ranked content now prioritizes quality information about your product or industry that happens to include scattered keywords and synonyms, not the other way around. The demand for quality applies to substance and style: There are rewards for proper grammar as well as thorough research.

Post-Panda Google also punishes your site if you duplicate internal or pillage external content. The more egregious instances of this—plagiarizing content from another site or fleshing out your pages with stock

dribble—are easily avoided. But if you have a large site, you may have near-duplicate pages that, for instance, provide descriptions for similar products or services.

This makes integration between your content writers and Web developers critical. Content writers need to know where their content appears on your site. If they're reusing large portions of in-house copy on multiple pages, search engines won't know which version to list above another, or which to index and which to ignore.

2. They skipped the meta description.

The 160-character meta description that appears below your search links has no bearing on your search rank (so says Google). It does, however, have a major impact on the likelihood of a potential customer clicking your link. Web traffic is not the same as Web sales, but if your content writers aren't focused on the first and most visible pitch to potential customers, they're missing the best opportunity to bring traffic to the conversion-focused content on your site.

Meta descriptions should employ all the familiar aspects of a marketing piece: a call to action and honest account of your offering, squeezed into the 160-character limit. In an age of unbounded content (no one edits online copy to fit a quarter-page advertisement), the meta description is the last vestige to value brevity.

3. They published on one platform.

It is not enough for your content writers to crank out a blog, post it on your website, and call it a content marketing campaign. Repurpose that content for a variety of outlets. If the blog post is a few hundred words, can it be expanded into a downloadable white paper? If the post is longer, can you excerpt teasing portions for your next email marketing piece?

Fold your content into social media campaigns. Post links to new articles on your Twitter feed and Facebook page. This extends the reach of your content marketing pieces and increases the chances that customers and market-watchers will read, link to, favorite, and like your work. Social media attention is a premier way to boost search rankings. As far as Bing sees it, if trusted bloggers and Twitter users love your article, then it's willing to bet the next searcher will, too.

4. They didn't talk to your customer service representatives (or check your Facebook page, Twitter feed...).

Speaking of social media, when's the last time your content writers took a peak at the stream of comments on your company's Facebook page or Twitter feed? Have they ever heard from your customer service staff about why people call in and the questions they ask? These insights are valid, if anecdotal, addendums to keyword research that can help generate authentic, search-engine-friendly content. They're not a replacement for keywords but an avenue to discover new ones, as well as an aggregator of themes and topics for the next round of long-form content pieces.

5. They forgot that content is king.

Ongoing refinements to search engine algorithms have elevated high-quality content as the best way to improve search ranking. Engines have honed their ability to value factors that align with the desires of searchers. Articles with images and videos boost your ranking not because they exploit a weakness in Yahoo! but because your consumers like images and videos. Having your post shared widely by credible sources pushes it toward the top of Bing not because of an SEO trick but because it effectively validates the quality of your work.

This is great news for content writers. It means they can peek behind the curtain and access data-rich analytics to inform, but not burden, their work. They can stop keyword stuffing and start producing high-quality content people read, love, and forward—actions that build your brand, increase your Web traffic, and generate sales.

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