SANCTUARY

White paper

WWW.SANCTUARYMG.COM

SANCTUARY'S SEO FUNDAMENTALS GUIDE:

HOW TO GET FOUND ONLINE

Introduction

Do you want to be found online by people actively searching for the types of products or services you offer? Of course you do! That's the whole point of having a website, right? Well just having the website up won't automatically attract visitors—you have to first take steps to optimize your web content and make it attractive to the search engines responsible for showing your website in search results. That's SEO!

This white paper will introduce you to SEO and the fundamentals you should be implementing to take your website to the next level and ultimately get found by potential customers. We'll cover the following:

- Importance of SEO
- Search Engines
- Keywords and Keyphrase Research
- On-Page Optimization
- Technical SEO
- Authority
- KPIs and Reporting

SEO: What is it and why does it matter?

SEO stands for search engine optimization. Essentially, it's optimizing your website content so that it's more attractive and understandable to search engines, with the end goal of those search engines showing your content more often to internet users.
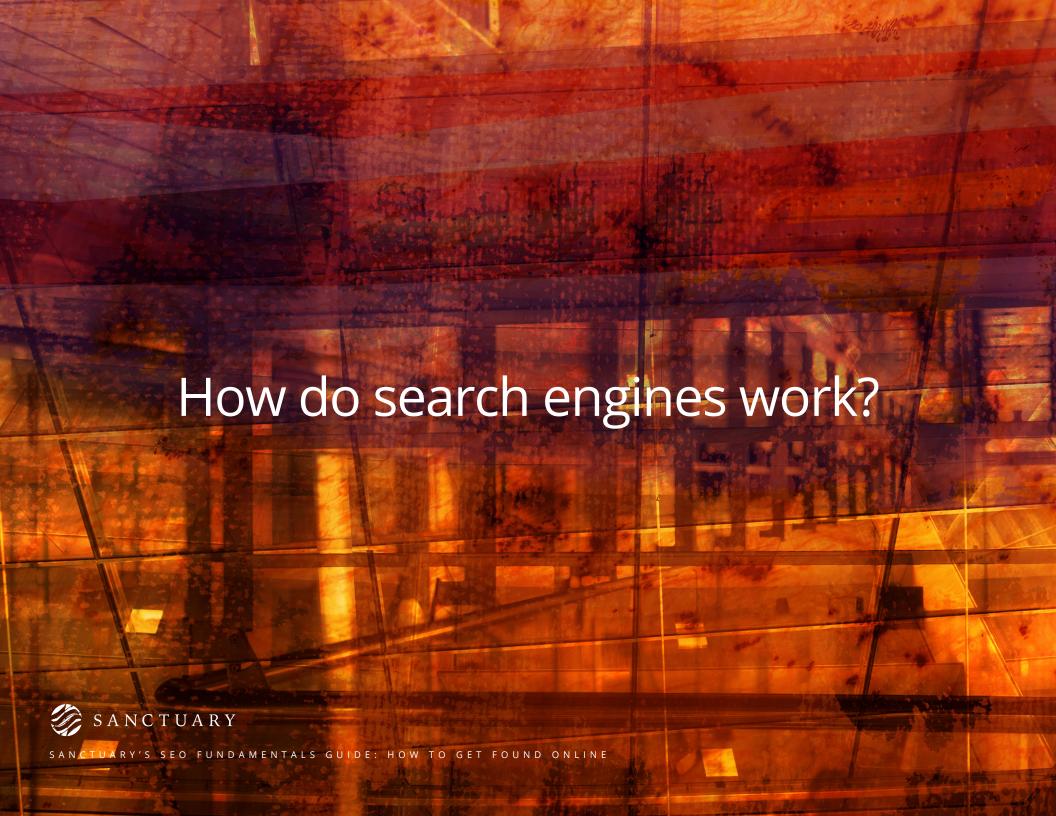
So why does it matter? We've already said it! Optimizing your website helps you get your information seen by more people who are searching for the products or services you offer. That's ultimately why you have a website in the first place, right? To be found online by potential customers.

In its simplest form, SEO is figuring out what your potential customers are searching for and creating that content for them. It's also optimizing your existing website content to appease search engines and make sure you can be found.

How do search engines work?

Search engines like Google or Bing are not only looking for web pages that contain certain keywords, but they are also looking for websites that add overall value to a user's experience. Search engines like Google analyze content on your website to see what it's about and what it's offering to potential site visitors.
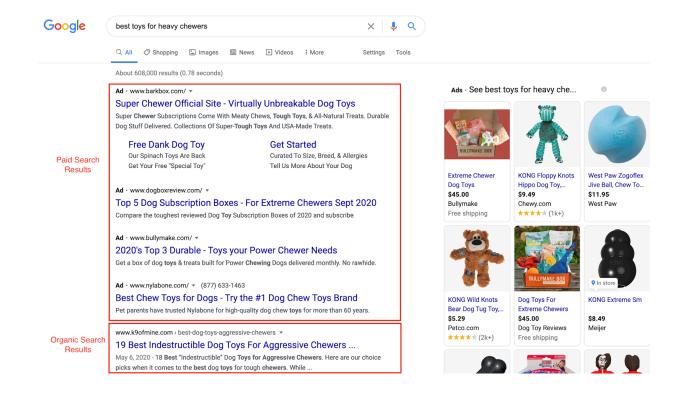
Google in particular is very focused on understanding the full context of the content on your site after many recent algorithm updates. They may have been hyper focused on keyword matching previously (meaning they just looked for the presence of keywords and showed results accordingly), but now they have shifted to analyzing intent and context around those words. They're taking it a few steps further to try to understand the intent of someone's search query and then showing results that match that—rather than excluding results that don't include that exact keyword but are perhaps super relevant to the search.

Search engines also work to judge the overall authority and trustworthiness of your content. Publishing content regularly, having a great organizational structure, featuring extensive resources and tools, and getting backlinks from other sites are all things that show search engines your website is valuable, and therefore, should be shown more often to internet users making relevant searches.
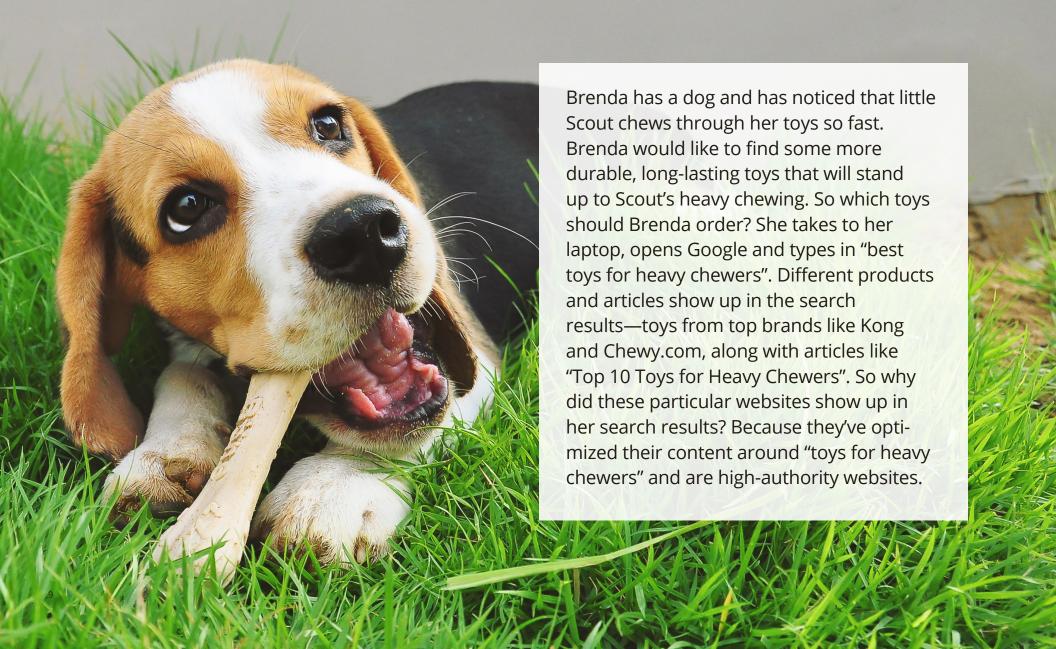
Organic vs. Paid Search

When you search for something and results come up, you've probably noticed that the first couple of items in the results list say "ad" next to them. Those are paid search results that people have spent money to get there. The results below those ads start the organic search results, meaning the results that are there naturally because of their SEO value.
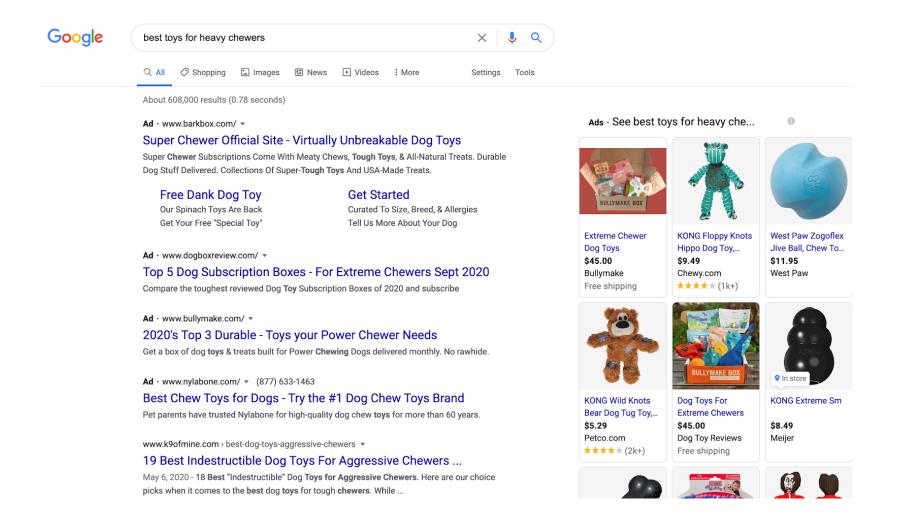
Who's looking for you and how?

The best way to explain this is presenting you with a hypothetical situation:

Brenda has a dog and has noticed that little Scout chews through her toys so fast. Brenda would like to find some more durable, long-lasting toys that will stand up to Scout's heavy chewing. So which toys should Brenda order? She takes to her laptop, opens Google and types in "best toys for heavy chewers". Different products and articles show up in the search results—toys from top brands like Kong and Chewy.com, along with articles like "Top 10 Toys for Heavy Chewers". So why did these particular websites show up in her search results? Because they've optimized their content around "toys for heavy chewers" and are high-authority websites.

Example: Search results for "toys for heavy chewers"

So how do you get to that point where your website is showing up for important keywords? You start by coming up with a list of keywords that make sense for your business, and then use SEO tactics (like the ones outlined in this paper) to optimize content for those specific words or phrases.

There are so many different tools available that provide you with insight on terms and phrases people are searching for across the internet that are relevant to your business. This helps you understand how people are searching for your products and services. Put yourself in the shoes of your customer. What are their pain points and how can you solve them with your products or services? What might you search for if you were in their shoes? Once you can nail down that mindset, you'll start getting found by those searchers!

On-Page Optimization

On-page optimization is the practice of actually optimizing a web page for search engines. On-page SEO includes updates to content as well as other elements on the page. On-page optimization typically applies to existing content on your site, but these elements should also be taken into consideration for new content creation so you don't end up going back and having to optimize it.

Optimize Content

- **Add Headings and Subheadings** - Every page on your website should have an H1 (heading 1) tag and subheadings. These are great opportunities to include keywords you're targeting for the page. Subheadings help to break up the content into smaller, easier to consume sections and give people a way to skim the content for information they need.
- **Shorten Paragraphs** - Looking at a long page of densely packed content can feel so daunting—something you never want a website visitor to feel. Keep paragraphs no longer than four lines of text to make the content easier to read.
- **Create Lists** - Another great way to break up big sections of content is to pull out information that can be organized into bulleted or numbered lists. Just like subheadings, these lists help people scan your content for the information they're looking for.

Optimize Images

Condense Images

Make sure that images on your site aren't too large, because that could be slowing down overall site speed. As a general rule when uploading an image to your site, we recommend keeping it between 1500 and 2500 pixels wide so it displays correctly and doesn't slow down the page you use it on.

Add Alternative Text

In addition, each image on your site should have "alternative text" or "alt text" to let search engines know what the images are showing. This is another great opportunity to include keywords if applicable. You can also add title text, but that's more for telling the end user what an image is about, rather than the search engine.

For example, if someone were writing an article about leash training a puppy, they might include an image of a puppy on a leash. The alt text for that image would be something like "puppy walking on leash with owner practicing leash training" (with the key phrase being "leash training").

File name: WHITEPAPER-MOCKUP-600px.png
File type: image/png
Uploaded on: January 14, 2020
File size: 29 KB
Dimensions: 600 by 333 pixels

Alternative Text: Google Ads Whitepaper
Describe the purpose of the image. Leave empty if the image is purely decorative.

Title: Google Ads Whitepaper

Add More Visuals

Not only should you optimize the images that are already on your site, but you should also try to add more images or visuals where at all possible or logical. Internet users are more interested in visual content, which means they'll spend more time on a page that's more visual—and Google knows that! A web page with more diverse media such as images, infographics and videos has more ranking power than one with just purely text.

Things to Avoid

There are so many things you should do to create great content on a page. You know you want to have keyword-rich content that's well organized and easy to read, but there are some pitfalls to avoid. Here are a few things not to do.

- **Keyword Stuffing** - Including keywords in your content is important, but not at the expense of sounding natural and relatable to readers! Overusing a keyword on a page of content to the point where it sounds like it was written by a robot does not provide value, which is ultimately what search engines care about.
- **Thin Content** - Don't just create a page to create one—make sure you're saying something worthwhile and valuable. You may think "thin" refers to a low word count, but it actually refers to the quality of the content on a page. Avoid creating multiple pages that all have a similar idea just to have more pages. If it can be accomplished in one solid page, then stick to one and don't force the rest.
- **Duplicate Content** - This will take you back to school days when you were hit with threats of expulsion for plagiarizing. Google recognizes when two pages have the same content, even if it's just a paragraph. This is a signal to search engines that the two pages are competing against each other. The consequence is that Google will choose to show the page that's deemed more valuable and relevant and not show the duplication.

Technical SEO

As you can probably imagine, the way you set up a website is important. It goes far beyond what the user can see on the "front end" of your website, including technical things that happen behind the scenes.

Think of it like a person's health. They might look healthy and fit on the outside, but perhaps their diet isn't what it should be and they're not as healthy as they appear. The same goes for a website, it might be the coolest, flashiest site you've ever seen, but if it's not set up properly, it may not perform how you think. Below are some things to consider to help maintain a healthy website from the inside out.
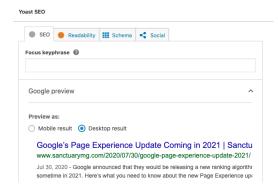
Install Yoast SEO (for WordPress users only)

If you already have a WordPress website, that's great news! While you don't have to have Word-Press to do SEO, the platform makes it much easier to not only implement changes and updates, but to see how different pages on your website are scored for target keywords.

This is possible through a WordPress plugin called Yoast SEO—available as both a free and premium version. Yoast makes it really easy to add a meta title, meta description, URL slug and focus keyword every time you create a new post or page on your site. And this isn't even sponsored content! Yoast is just a really ideal plugin to use for SEO—and many digital marketers concur.

If you're not familiar with plugins, we'd be happy to take a look at your site to see what you already have and what's possible to add if needed.

Migrate to WordPress if You Haven't Already

The type of CMS (content management system) your site is built in plays a huge role in its overall success. When things aren't organized and structured well and it's confusing to make updates, it's hard to take your site to that next level. WordPress has become the most popular CMS because it's simple and easy to use, but also easy to build on and add more functionality with plugins. Here are a few reasons why you should consider moving your site to WordPress if it's not already:

- **Secure** - WordPress is constantly updating its software to increase security and prevent attacks.
- **SEO-Friendly** - WordPress makes it easy to focus on SEO with plugins like Yoast SEO. It allows you to enter a focus keyword for each page on your site, and then it gives you insight into how well your page is optimized for that keyword. Search engines tend to prefer WordPress websites because they are well structured and easy to crawl.
- **Simple User Interface** - Unlike sites that have to be hard coded or have really technical, confusing interfaces, WordPress is easy for anyone to use—not just web developers. With a little bit of training and practice, you'll be learning how to create new pages and do everything you need to on your site in no time.
- **Experience** - The Sanctuary team has extensive experience working with WordPress websites, and it's what our developers work with most often. You could say we're WordPress wizards by now!
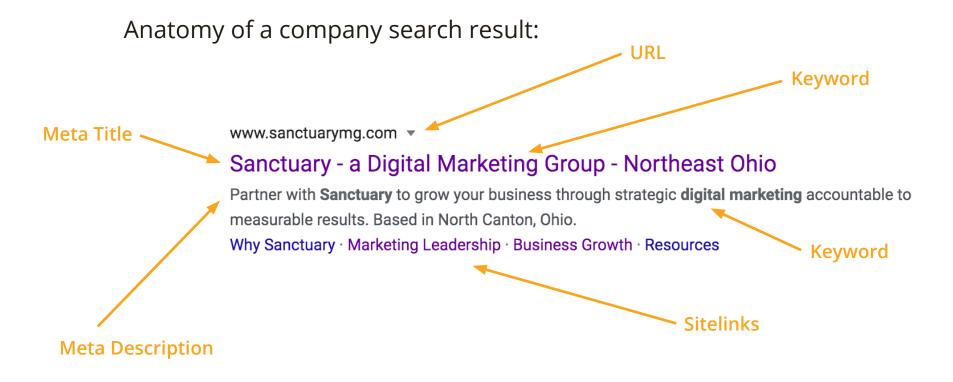
Include Meta Information

Make sure that each page on your site has a meta title and meta description. These are elements that help communicate to search engines what a page is all about. These are two great opportunities to include those keywords that you're trying to rank for. While these are primarily for search engines, these are also seen by people in search results.

When you make a search and look through search results, what helps you decide which link to click on? Ranking has a lot to do with it, but it's also about getting the right information that matches your search intent.

Here are a few things to think about when writing meta titles and descriptions:

- Your meta title should give an accurate overview of what a page is about. No one wants to click on a link that seems like the information they were looking for, only to find that the page is about something different than what they thought.
- Your meta title and description should contain keywords that people are looking for.
- Your meta description should include a call-to-action to get people interested in clicking through to your website.

Anatomy of a company search result:

URL

Keyword

Meta Title

www.sanctuarymg.com

Sanctuary - a Digital Marketing Group - Northeast Ohio

Partner with **Sanctuary** to grow your business through strategic **digital marketing** accountable to measurable results. Based in North Canton, Ohio.

Why Sanctuary · Marketing Leadership · Business Growth · Resources

Keyword

Sitelinks

Meta Description

Redirect Broken Links

Crosslinking to other pages on your site is a great way to direct users even further through your content, but it really does no good when the links don't work! In fact, broken links actually hurt your site's SEO value and overall ranking. Broken links occur when a page has been deleted or moved. An easy way to get rid of this issue is to go through and clean up those old or broken links by either updating with new links or redirecting the old ones, which is easy to do when it's your own content. However, if you're linking out to a third party site, there's really nothing you can do about the broken link except replace it with another page.

At Sanctuary, we have tools we use like SEMRush to help us identify these broken links, but you can start doing this yourself by clicking on each link you see within your website content and ensuring that it goes to the right place. If not, you'll need to log in on the back end of your site to make the update.

Optimize Site Speed

Use a free tool like Google's [PageSpeed Insights](#) to test the speed of your website, and be sure to test for both desktop and mobile speed. This particular tool actually generates suggestions for how to improve page speed on a specific web page after it's done analyzing it. Suggestions will probably include a few fairly simple things like condensing image sizes (which you could tackle yourself if you have the time!), among other coding and development tasks that are best handled by an experienced web developer.

Google prioritizes mobile page speed over desktop, so you should pay special attention to the mobile results and recommendations.
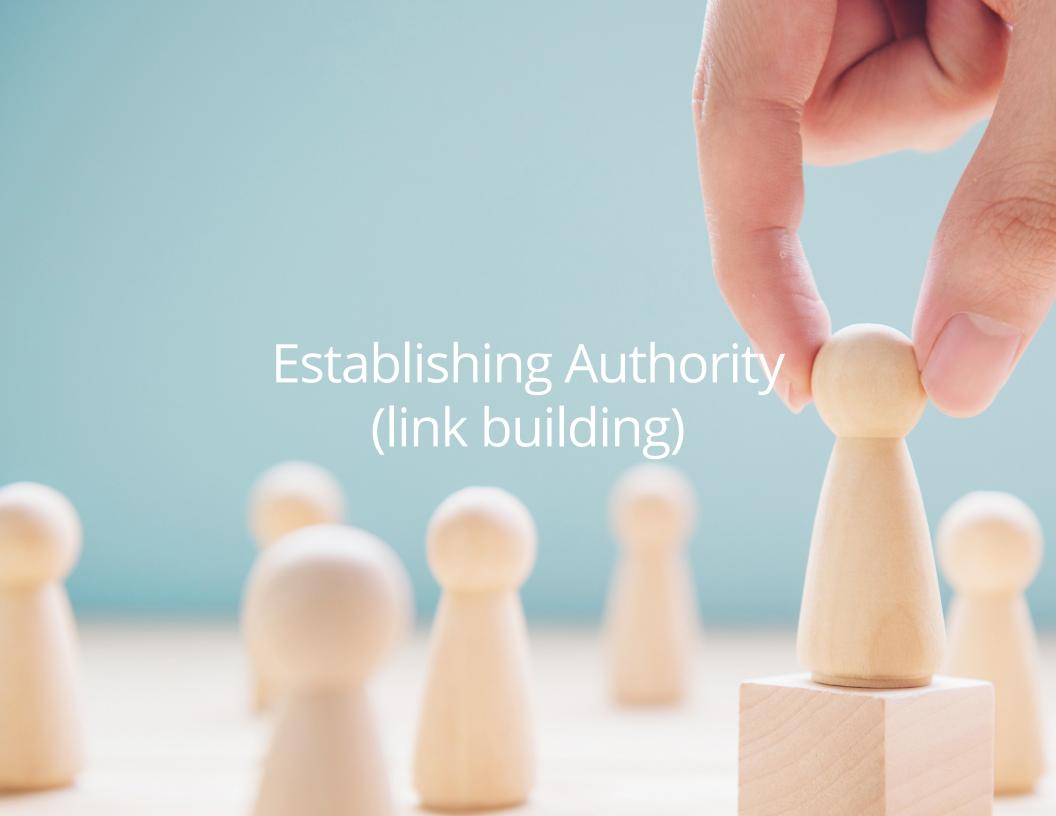
Implement Structured Data

Generally speaking, structured data is any type of data that has been organized into some type of structure. In an SEO sense, structured data refers to implementing markups on a page to give more information on what type of content is on it. These markups on the backend help search engines better understand the content and potentially use it for SERPs (search engine results pages—things like rich snippets, carousels, knowledge boxes, etc.).

If you have a lot of useful content on your website, you should definitely be optimizing it further by implementing structured data. You have the opportunity to provide more context to search engines on things like blog posts, recipes, videos, product reviews, tables and graphs and more.

To implement structured data, you'll need to use a tool like Google's <u>Structured Data Markup Helper</u>. It will help guide you through choosing the type of data you're marking up and how to actually implement it.

Establishing Authority
(link building)

It's not just about YOUR website and your content, but your relationship with other websites. Just like it gives a person credibility when other people know them, it gives your business and your site credibility when other sites mention and link to you. This includes other blogs, forums, directories, databases and even social media platforms. Having social media profiles that share content from your site certainly helps, but you also want to try getting others to share links back to your site. It really all starts with building relationships and connections with others in the industry.

Here are a few ways to start link building:

- Get listed on trustworthy directories
- Submit a testimonial
- Submit a guest blog post to another blog
- Tags/mentions on social media
- Content shares on social media
- Just ask for backlinks!

The first point—get listed on trustworthy directories—is probably the easiest one to tackle on your own without an ongoing digital marketing plan. Start by researching directories that are trusted and popular within your industry, and then begin submitting your information to those directories to get listed.

Measuring Success

When it comes to measuring your success, first thing's first—do you have Google Analytics installed on your site? Google's free web analytics software allows you to analyze data from visitors to your website, giving you tons of helpful insight you can take and turn into actionable items to help improve your site.

We use Google Analytics to help us generate reports for our clients each month that touch on their important metrics and tell us what kind of progress we're making. Once you have that in place, you can start setting goals and choosing the metrics that make the most sense for your business.

Set goals for your company

Sanctuary's SEO services are designed to help you:

- Increase brand awareness.
- Increase company visibility and online presence.
- Get found by people actively searching for your products or services.

When we get started with a new client, we always discuss your business goals so that we know which metrics we should be tracking and reporting on for you. Start by listing out your goals, and then try to pair them with metrics that correlate.

Decide on metrics that will help you reach your goals.

Search Traffic

This is the metric that's impacted most by SEO, and one that you should definitely track to see improvements. Organic search traffic essentially tells you how many people are coming to your website from finding you online in search results. If your traffic is low, that means there's more you can do to get found more easily. You can also watch the trend over time. SEO tactics can take a little time to make a big impact, so watching your organic traffic over time tells a good story. If you're dipping, you know you have some work to do. If you're on a continual incline, you know you're doing it right!

Conversion Rate

Why do you have a website? Probably to give people more information about your business, but really it's to GET business. When you create a web page, there should be a purpose or something you want people to take action on. That's where things like contact forms and tool downloads come in handy to garner a "conversion" from a potential customer. When you give users something to DO on a page, that's setting yourself up for higher conversions, or instances of people taking action and doing something on your site.

When you start implementing SEO tactics, you're tailoring your content to those who are actively searching for the types of products or services you offer. That means that the likelihood of someone finding what they wanted in your content should increase, you should be attracting more relevant internet users, and therefore, you should start to see conversions increase from piqued interest.

Keyword Ranking

If your website is all about dog toys but you don't come up in search results for dog toys, there's something not quite right there. Once you've gone through key phrase research and know which keywords are important to your business, it's important to track how your ranking changes for those top keywords. Ideally, SEO services should help you bring up your ranking for those keywords, so that's something you should track.

But it's important not to hold yourself to unrealistic standards. If competition is big in your industry and it's very over saturated, it will be harder to rank for products or services that everyone else is offering. Conversely, it's easier to rank for very niche services or products that are harder to come by.

If you're interested in seeing where you stand for your keywords, MOZ has a great free tool called the Keyword Explorer. You can simply type in a keyword or your site's URL to get more insight.

Partner with a team that can help optimize your website beyond the SEO basics.

We've covered the fundamentals of SEO, but just because we could fit it all into one white paper doesn't mean you should take it all on yourself! Truly optimizing your website and taking it to the next level to get better organic traffic takes time, dedication, tools and a well-thought-out strategy to help you reach your business goals. We'd love to put that strategy together for you. Contact the Sanctuary team today to get started on SEO for your website.

SANCTUARY

A DIGITAL MARKETING GROUP

sanctuarymg.com