PR News'
SEO
Special Report

CRISIS MANAGEMENT GUIDEBOOK

PR News' Crisis Management Guidebook gives you the tools you need to create a step-by-step action plan that will help get through the first hour of a crisis, tips for crafting messages under pressure, advice on creating a social media action plan, checklists to gauge your readiness for a crisis and much more.

Foreword

"If a tree falls in a **forest** and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" It does, probably. Still, the tree's demise goes largely unnoticed. Similarly, if your content is posted online and nobody sees it, well, you get the idea.

This is where search engine optimization (SEO) comes in, of course. As my colleague Mark Renfree wrote in *3 Ways SEO Has Changed and What It Means for Your Site* (page 14), "Like almost everything in the digital space, SEO is in a constant state of flux." That, of course, makes SEO "a frustratingly mysterious subject," again quoting Renfree.

It also makes writing about SEO difficult. The recommended tactics and tips you read about in this report could be out of date not long after they were put on the page.

Does that mean you should avoid applying the SEO practices recommended here? It means you, as a communicator, need to realize that Google regularly tweaks algorithms to even the playing field and provide a better user experience. In plainer terms Google is trying to eliminate dirty tricks that improve SEO without justification and it's attempting to emphasize high-quality content.

Back to the question posed above: should you avoid applying the SEO practices recommended here? It's a practical question actually. A Nasdaq Corporate Solutions/PR News survey in the July 11 edition of *PR News Pro* indicated communicators want their press releases to be found in web search results, but few considered SEO when issuing releases.

Specifically, 25% of those surveyed said their top priority in sending out a release is "to be seen in web search results." But how to explain the finding that nearly 40% said they fail to consider SEO when it comes to allocating time and resources for press releases. In other words, while PR pros want their press releases to be found in web searches, nearly half are ignoring SEO when they prepare their releases. A corollary softens the blow slightly: 21% said they consider SEO only when preparing "higher profile releases."

Why are communicators ignoring SEO when they know it can help? As Renfree wrote, it's frustratingly mysterious and difficult. So communicators, as most people, tend to ignore things they see as difficult and mysterious. If so, this report can help.

It's my contention that while SEO requires you to take some steps you might not otherwise, much of SEO is good writing, editing and design. For example, look at some of the suggestions made by Professor Olesya Venger in Steve Goldstein's article, *12 Essential Steps for Effective SEO* (page 4): "Create titles and subtitles to make sure that search engines (or online crawlers) will find your content easier." "Italicize or boldface the most important content." "Augment your stories with photos." "Rely on bullets to make reading easier." "Use keywords that are similar to the most popular keywords in your industry." Nothing unreasonable there.

Here's more, this from Marek Biernacinski. The title of his article, *It's Good to Be King: How Creating Quality Content Solves SEO Issues* (page 5), summarizes Biernacinski's thoughts. "The main point to remember is that quality is, above all else, what will build successful exposure. Focusing on keywords and links for the sake of keywords and links brings about SPAM and results in wasted spending by your brand."

Keywords, in Biernacinski's view, are relevant, though. They "serve as an invitation to search engines and as validation to interested readers," he writes. When you provide quality content about your brand, "keywords happen naturally…search engines see this and reward the page with higher search result placement. In turn, readers find the content more relevant to their search and stick around longer."

There's nothing mysterious about that.

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6 Building Blocks for an Unbreakable SEO Strategy

By Mark Renfree

In today's digitally focused world there are few things more important for PR than SEO. Even if your content provides a compelling and easy to understand answer to a user's question, no one is going to dig through pages and pages of Google results just to find it. If you brand's website and content can't be found within the first few results, it may not deserve to be found. However, if you're doing everything right and publishing informative and relevant content online and still not ranking well, then you just might need to refine your SEO strategy.

Securing that coveted top ranking in search results requires equal parts art and science. Search companies are constantly changing and updating their algorithms, and recently they've been favoring quality content over quantity of content and keyword stuffing. To rank well your content has to first be good, and then be optimized.

Become your organization's resident SEO wizard by attending PR News' SEO Strategies That Will Help Your Message Find the Right Audience webinar on Aug. 23 from 1:30-3:30 p.m. EST. At this webinar you'll learn the tricks of the trade from SEO masters at organizations such as Cisco, Square and CareerBuilder.com.

Catherine Page, webmaster and SEO producer, Rigid Industries, has these six tips for communicators looking to tighten up their SEO strategy and consistently rank in the top spots on Google.

- Maintain relevant and meaningful content.

- Perform periodic audits on your sites, making sure to identify and eliminate any existing unnatural inbound links.

- Google will be looking for companies that have robust content marketing strategies. These are the type of companies Google will want to support. To ensure your business is well rounded in this effort, make sure your website has regular and helpful content that pertains to your niche market and that has social signals from regular social network sharing and engagements.

- Make sure your site is consistently updated. Fresh content tells Google that your site is active and not stagnant.

- Social media diversification is a must. Today being part of one or two different social media platforms is not enough. The more sites you utilize, the more robust your reach will become.

- Optimize your mobile game plan. Your site's mobile performance dramatically matters to your SEO rankings.

12 Essential Steps for Effective SEO

By Steve Goldstein

Google's search algorithm rewards websites that are focused on improving the user experience and that publish quality content, and punishes those sites that do neither. You know what kind of punishment this entails—your content will be buried under your competitors' content in Google searches that use the keywords tied thematically to whatever product or service you sell.

That's the strategic side of making sure your content shows up high in the first page of a Google search. Here are some tactical search engine optimization (SEO) tips from Olesya Venger, PhD, an assistant professor at the Hank Greenspun School of Journalism and Media Studies, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

- Use tags and categories to sort your content on your site in a logical, easy-to-find and understandable manner.

- Create titles and subtitles to make sure that search engines (or online crawlers) will find your content easier.

- Provide a short (up to 50 words) description of your product. Write a byline and/or an abstract for your article.

- Use keywords that are similar to the most popular keywords in your industry.

- Follow the 3/100 rule. Make sure that every text you write contains at least three keywords associated with your product per 100 words of text.

- Follow the 300 rule when writing posts for your blog or placing content on your site. If the article contains 600 words, split it in half, so that its second part is hidden and its first part serves as a stimulus to open the second part of the article.

- Supply the transition from the first part of the article to the second part of the article with a catchy phrase ("Look here for more lucrative news about Brand B!").

- Italicize or boldface the most important content.

- Augment your stories with photos.

- Rely on bullets to make reading easier.

- Make sure that your content is posted at noon, and take note of what time zone your clients or target audience reside in.

- Avoid generalizations when describing your product or service.

It's Good to Be King: How Creating Quality Content Solves SEO Issues

By Marek Biernacinski

Keyword-based SEO is a trap. Most of us know that keyword stuffing is a bad idea, but many aren't aware that most of the effort put into keywords is of low consequence. Keywords shouldn't be viewed as a primary metric but rather as a natural result of effective content that brings value to the target reader. Algorithms are smarter these days, and effective conversion comes from truly understanding the voice needed to reach the ideal target market.

SEO Isn't Dead, but These Myths Must Die

Before we get too far into that, let me touch on stubborn, enduring SEO myths that need to bite the dust. **Google's** algorithms underwent major changes in 2011 with its Panda update. A subsequent update in 2012, Penguin, pushed things even further. The primary focus was to reduce the impact of sleazy SEO tricks for ranking pages higher and increase the relevance of high-quality content:

Myth: Keywords matter and we should stuff them anywhere we can.

Truth: Keyword phrases stuffed into written content for supposed SEO gains are obvious. There's no reason why "San Francisco car mechanic" should show up once, let alone 10 times, in a 500-word piece. Rather than getting ranked highly, all you'll end up doing is losing credibility with your target reader and diminishing your search engine rankings.

Myth: Links matter, too, so let's swap links anywhere we can.

Truth: The days of submitting a press release to dozens of directories for exposure are long gone. These directories worked during a time when search algorithms didn't know how to differentiate a link from a reputable source and one from a site with millions of links meant to trick crawlers. Directories don't work, and really, did they ever? I'm sure all the journos out there are just scouring directories to find that hidden nugget of a press release.

There are other myths, but these are our focus. The common thread between the two is the elimination of so-called SEO tricks that helped boost exposure at the expense of quality for the reader. Today, Google plays the role of the search engine police, penalizing sites that try to abuse these two strategies. But the real question is, why would you want to even try?

One thing to understand throughout this discussion is that we're primarily concerned with optimization as it pertains to Google. While I won't go as far as to claim other search engines—most notably, Bing, Yahoo! and Ask—don't matter, it's true that their combined market share pales in comparison to Google. Google users accounted for 68.8% of all U.S., desktop-based searches, according to a January 2016 report by comScore. Globally, that shot up to 89.3%.

Yet Google's not the only company concerned with giving users a great experience, so it's sensible that most of what we will explore will play nicely with all major search engines.

Content Is King, but Only in its Domain

We all know content is king, yet it can be argued that this is half right only. After all, quality content doesn't actually get eyeballs to the site; it just keeps them there. What the adage really means to say is that, assuming you get your target market to your site, valuable, high-quality content is what will keep it there. This is important if you want a chance at having those readers respond to your calls to action. Remember, traffic for the sake of hits does nothing if it doesn't accomplish specific goals:

- We need more buzz about an upcoming event to increase ticket sales and thus increase the chance of media coverage.

- We want more downloads of our brand's app, leading to more in-app purchases and thus greater revenue.

- We want investors to learn of our brand to bring in more funding.

These goals make sense, and they provide a focus for SEO. Keywords help bring in traffic, but if those keywords misled the visitor into thinking the site would have other information than what was found, the marketing budget will have been spent without results. This abuse of keywords often is a primary culprit in wasted marketing budgets that yield little in the way of results.

All this is not to say that keywords are not relevant. The contrary is true. Keywords serve as an invitation to search engines and as validation to interested readers. If you're bringing value to the reader, keywords happen naturally by way of writing on the subject matter. Search engines see this and reward the page with higher search result placement. In turn, readers find the content more relevant to their search and stick around longer.

The Keyword: What Is It Good For?

Where keyword strategy comes into play is in diversification and analysis of which versions of what you want to say yield the best results.

Representing a Republican candidate? "GOP polls" had nearly 12 million searches in February 2016, according to Google. "Republican polls" topped that with 15.8 million. Both were dwarfed by "presidential polls," coming in at 52 million.

When writing about a subject, it pays to look at common themes and terms and compare them to similar terminology. Is there a term that says the same thing, wouldn't require changing the text much (apart from rewriting a sentence or two), yet would show up more often when my target market searches for this information?

Keywords also play an important role in titles and headings. Search engine crawlers like to check for keywords within headings to determine just how relevant the page is. After all, if your main points have nothing to do with the keyword, how likely is it that the page is relevant to the search?

Titles are even more important. Eight of 10 people will read a given headline, but only two of 10 will

click on it to read the article, according to the content marketing gurus at Copyblogger. When content shows up in a search result or social media news feed, readers filter what they consume based on headlines. Journalists have been doing the same thing to your press releases for decades, be it by judging your elevator pitch, email subject line or Twitter pitch.

No Substitute for Quality

The main point to remember is that quality is, above all else, what will build successful exposure. Focusing on keywords and links for the sake of keywords and links brings about spam and results in wasted spending by your brand. The brand isn't paying to get more people to click on a link; it's paying for realized business goals.

As in the past, before the Internet changed the landscape, the basics still boil down to building value for a brand. Is your content doing justice to the brand?

- **Is the voice representing the brand?** If the writing doesn't reflect the brand's attitude, the target market won't identify with it. It's difficult to

ask readers to follow through with a call to action if they don't think the brand is meant for them.

- **Is your guest blog post targeting the right audience?** Many in PR have taken to counting a guest blog post as a win if it lands on a highly trafficked site, but what use is that if the source site has no synergy with your goals? Seek sites that mesh with your brand's needs—for example, a muscle-building forum if you're a workout supplement brand; a programmer's tip site if you're working with a carpal tunnel surgeon; or perhaps a cultural appreciation site in which to place a blog from your exotic tours client.

- **Are you addressing the reader's needs, or the brand's?** I see this all the time with press releases, where there's nothing interesting being said, but the fact that a press release has been issued helps stroke someone's ego and calms a brand executive into thinking something is being done. These are self-serving pieces that don't answer the "Why should I care?" question, and they use keywords to bait readers into clicking on the release. This quickly diminishes a brand's reputation, and it could hurt chances of the media bothering to take a look at future statements.

The Golden Rule

Many have butchered the golden rule to fit their theses, so I don't feel too bad for using a similar analogy: Optimize your content the way you would want to have it optimized if you were searching for that information. That pretty much sums up Google's approach to its algorithm refinements.

SEO isn't meant to be a silver bullet for attracting Web traffic. Rather, it's a reward for doing everything right. In PR, the goal is to present your brand in a good light and manage its reputation. Refining your writing, as well as being mindful of keyword strategy and collaborating via other channels, such as guest blogging or social media, results in a stronger brand and greater attention to your content.

We're in this to build brands and reputations. Let's not squander them by trying to game the SEO system.

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4 Questions (and 8 Tips) to Help You Master Writing for SEO

By Mark Renfree

P R pros often say they're right-brained creative types, naturally averse to math. True or not, they still have to face down the reality of Google's search algorithm and become skilled in search engine optimization (SEO) tactics. That is, if they want their messages to be found.

It turns out that one of those right-brain skills— good writing—may be the best SEO weapon available. Now more than ever, SEO success depends on strategic writing skills. Creating content that satisfies search engines' need to deliver useful information improves Google search rankings.

Before you go on a writing spree for your site, think strategically about what you're creating. Knowing what you want out of your content will give you a window into what Google's users want. Mark Baumann, head of content & SEO at Square, recommends asking these four questions before writing content with SEO specifically in mind.

1. What is the company's overarching goal that you want to support?

- Increases in brand awareness?
- Drive more traffic to your site?
- Generate sales leads?
- Convert more leads into customers?

2. Who is the target audience?

3. What is the strategy you plan to develop and implement?

- What types of content do you plan to optimize or create?

- How do you leverage PR & communications?
- What are your success metrics?

4. What's your mid- to long-range action plan to scale your efforts?

Once you have all these questions answered and you're ready to start creating content that's naturally friendly to search engines, consider these eight tips for quality SEO writing from Victoria Holmes, communications specialist with the District of Columbia Government.

1. Be clear.

2. Check for spelling and grammar errors.

3. Write in an easy to follow, plain language.

4. Use a mix of keywords.

5. Create new and fresh content; don't duplicate.

6. Use descriptive anchor text.

7. Keep content length appropriate.

8. Provide calls to action in the text.

3 Types of Measurement Tools to Eye for Your Next Campaign

By PR News Editors

There's long been fervent debate within the PR discipline surrounding the topic of measurement. The Barcelona Principles offer some much needed guidance in this regard and have helped to standardize the overarching framework of PR measurement across the various industries communicators operate in.

But once you've developed a program and set your KPIs, how exactly do you go about doing the work of measuring? The communications space is now inundated with a vast array of tools ranging from free to expensive. And they all promise to be the alpha and omega of your measurement needs.

Jovan Hackley, director of marketing & PR, Student Loan Genius, and featured speaker at the upcoming PR News Measurement Conference, offers a quick run-down of three of the different types of measurement tools that communicators should consider when planning their PR programs.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

It's critical that PR professionals maintain the ability to see success the same way their key organizational players see it. Normally, that means staying tapped into the revenue, membership or engagement numbers that are important to every stakeholder and the life of the business. Unfortunately, as many communicators know, much of this data is locked behind stubborn silos. It's a topic PR News has covered before, but thankfully many CRM tools offer helpful ways to circumnavigate these obstacles by combining data from sales, marketing, PR and beyond to give communicators a picture of how their campaigns are impacting multiple divisions of the business. Hackley cites SalesForce, Avectra and IMIS as a couple of the effective CRM tools that can help you account for the bigger picture.
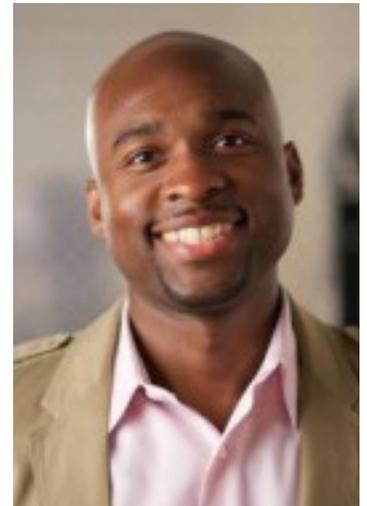
Live Battle Cards

"Late in my career, I discovered the term 'battle card,'" says Hackley. "These 'cards' are used in the private sector to train salespeople on how to respond and compare to other competing organizations."

Jovan Hackley, director of marketing & PR, Student Loan Genius

Stacking your organization's work up against that of the competitor is one of the most powerful aspects of measuring any PR campaign. By borrowing the idea of battle cards from the sales department, PR pros can use real-time comparisons to gain valuable insights that may fall through the cracks of a program that only focuses on your own campaign.

"The way that I make them 'live' is to develop a spreadsheet—or if you have the cash ActOn and Marketo will do it for you—to track media mentions, followership, sentiment and other key metrics to show how you compare in conversations in the news and online," says Hackley.

Web/Social Monitoring

This is likely the type of tool PR pros are most familiar with. Tools like Google Analytics and Sprout Social are familiar names in the communications

world. "When in the struggle to prove the value of PR, web analytics are a great data source for a win," says Hackley. "Showing that you increased traffic, engagement or were able to create a specific page or resource is a great way to showcase your team's efforts and prove that any expense you've incurred was well worth it."

No matter how powerful tools like Sprout Social and Google Analytics are, never underestimate the control and depth that can be achieved by a little mastery of Excel and its various functions.

"If you're not good with Excel, add someone on the team who's a rock star there. With a few simple formulas you can generate a report that includes the value points that are important to your leadership. Our job is to manage reputation both externally and internally. No off-the-shelf tool can do that in a board meeting or CEO conversation as well as we can. As PR professionals, we need to leverage that know-how to develop tracking tools that win and are meaningful for our organizations, clients, and efforts," says Hackley.

Reverse SEO: 5 Ways Communicators Can Erase Negative Citations

By Marek Biernacinski

Most in public relations know that sinking feeling. You get a call at 2 a.m. Your client has just made headline news after insulting a bouncer at a questionable watering hole and is now getting blamed for a nice, western-style bar brawl. Wait, is that just me?

Maybe this exact situation hasn't happened to you, but you likely have your own story about a client who made the wrong decision. Now that the crisis is over, it's possible that client is still paying for those same mistakes. The internet doesn't forget.

Or does it? Through the miracles of science (and some clever PR professionals), online reputations are no longer as cemented in history as perhaps once thought. Enter the advent of reverse SEO. Think of it as SEO but, well, in reverse.

The concept has been around for about a decade, and elements have seeped into the lexicon of public relations professionals. Namely, reputation management has caught on. But while reverse SEO shares characteristics of reputation management, reverse SEO is more specific to search results that pop up for clients when specific keywords or phrases are used.

Can this methodology truly rewrite history and give clients a clean slate? The answer, as with so many things in life, is: yes and no. Let's explore what reverse SEO is and how it can be applied. But first, how do you even know when you need to take action?

Eat an Appl… Keyword a Day

As with health, prevention is typically the most cost-effective option. Keeping fit throughout one's life is generally considered the best way to mitigate the downside of aging. Of course, in life and PR this is not always possible. Whether it's due to poor judgment or inadequate training, most clients eventually will encounter tricky PR issues. That's what you, the communications professional, are there for. Clients, however, may not always recognize when these tricky moments are happening.

Reverse SEO shares characteristics with crisis management, especially when it comes to information gathering. However, instead of checking media outlets for stories about your client, you monitor social media chatter and keyword results instead.

Bad Things Lurk on Those Social Medias

1. Invest in a Monitoring Tool: Those seeking to harm a brand's reputation frequently start off with complaints via social media. If a company is fortunate, the complaint will be made to the brand itself, either via a hashtag or posted on the company's page. Sometimes this is not the case. Hashtags are easy to monitor. Non-hashtag complaints are a little more involved. Invest in a social-media-monitoring tool that can help you identify specific keywords and mentions, allowing you to check on your brand's reputation

without having to rely on people coming to you specifically with a complaint.

Eventually tools using artificial intelligence likely will be sophisticated enough to monitor social media text and visuals. It's likely the various platforms will use them to monitor foul language and hate speech. Still, the need to oversee a brand's reputation will remain.

What are they saying about us?

1. Keyword Alert: Just as you subscribe to **Google**Alerts or another service to check for mentions of your brand in the media, so too should you monitor certain keywords involving the brand. We're not necessarily talking about the same keywords your brand wants to rank highly for. "**Subway** pedophile" is certainly not something the sandwich chain wants to rank highly for, but alas, a quick search lately doesn't result in news reports of sleazebags and mass transportation. Keep your brand's recent events in mind and try to get in the mind of those who dislike the company. What would they say about it? How would they refer to it?

Should I Just Apologize?

3. The Human Touch Works: You can forego the fancy technological approach and go with something a little more old-fashioned, too. A common source of negative publicity comes from unhappy customers. Businesses on **Yelp, eBay**, **Amazon**, or any other platform that includes a social reputation scoring system can attest to just how damaging several negative reviews in a row can be to a business. Thanks to social media, many of you have witnessed firsthand how out of control reputation management can become when negative experiences go viral.

Rather than attempting to divert attention, you may want to go after the source itself. Reach out to the offended party and find out what happened and how your brand can make things right. In your conversations, ask for concessions like removing negative public opinion. You'd be surprised how

SEO Data Points	
59%+	Percentage of U.S. adults using a search engine daily *
17.5 billion+	Number of searches using desktop computers (as of Jan '16) **
68%	Percentage of U.S.-based desktop searches conducted by Google**
89%	Percentage of global searches Google conducted**
1.1 trillion	Number of searches Google conducts yearly, including mobile devices **
70%	Percentage of people who never go beyond the 1st page of search results **
68%	Percentage of those clicking on one of the first five search results **

*Source: * Pew Research Center   ** comScore*

many people are willing to do so if they see they now have a voice and are heard. All of this may seem like something your brand's legal team should do, but you're better equipped to know what outcome will serve the brand's reputation best.

Storm the Fort, Overwhelm its Defenses

4. Fight Back With Content: The most involved strategy is to try and overwhelm existing search results with favorable ones. Just as companies one-up one another for popular search terms, the same can be done for those that reveal unwanted links. In this case, the competition isn't another company vying for "best car wash Las Vegas" but rather online articles, bloggers and whoever else has decided that your brand's reputation is the story du jour. Create a plethora of consumables, from blogs to white papers, guest articles, backlinks, and even social media posts (use platforms that show up in results, like Google Plus and **Twitter**). While you won't get rid of existing links, you can certainly increase the chances of certain search terms showing favorable results rather than negative ones. Combine this strategy with your usual SEO routine and you'll slowly start getting results.

While you're at it, check to see if there are other, related terms that are more frequently searched. Some of them may not yet have many negative associations, so now would be a good time to be proactive and enhance your brand's SEO for those terms before others hijack them.

5. Speed Kills: Keep in mind that this is a slow, arduous, but effective process. This isn't a tool for crisis management, but rather reducing exposure over time. Negative brand stories on reputable media sites likely will take up the top search results for quite some time just because search engines trust them. But you have the advantage. Stories die. Attention gets diverted. Eventually, media outlets stop reporting on the same issue, so the stories no longer benefit from additional exposure and renewed search rankings. Meanwhile, a continuous strategy on your part will eventually overcome old stories. Once you've secured the top five results, you've effectively captured 70% of all clicks.

As with most things worth doing in life, these processes take time. If only there were something you could do that was more direct.

A Foreign Solution

Enter Mario Costeja Gonzales, a Spaniard who auctioned off property after he ran into financial troubles in the late '90s. He wasn't very happy about that chapter of his life, so imagine his dismay when he discovered his financial issues were among the first search results that appeared when typing his name into a search engine. Determined to rid himself of evidence of past mistakes, Gonzales sued and eventually won. In 2014 the **European Court of Justice** agreed he should have the right to have information about his past financial troubles removed from search results. As a result, the EU's attempts at pushing through data privacy laws were rewarded with a key component, a so-called "right to be forgotten" ruling.

Thanks, Europe, I knew I could count on you for a seemingly foreign solution.

Within two years, Google alone received nearly 400,000 requests for removing certain links—not to mention requests other search engines received—highlighting just how much public interest in such a service there seems to be.

Of course, this applies to European residents only and excludes companies and brands. The ruling may seem of limited benefit to U.S.-based PR pros unless they represent a European resident.

Could a similar law be enacted here in the States? It's doubtful, at least for now. In the U.S., First Amendment concerns have trumped any serious attempts at creating the same ruling, but there are limited resources at your disposal. Google takes links down if they violate certain policies, namely if the content includes:

- violations of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act
- child pornography or promotes abuse
- sensitive, private information about individuals such as bank account numbers, credit card numbers, images of signatures
- sexually explicit images shared without the subject's consent

Hopefully, your brand will never be in a position of needing help with that last one, but you never know. Nevertheless, the options are severely limited compared to what you can request to have removed in Europe.

Just Give Us What We Want!

In reality, the European Union's "right to be forgotten" policy is what many people hope for when they think about the reverse SEO concept. The field is still relatively young, perhaps 10 years old, and there are some innovative ideas coming out of both established digital marketing companies and start-ups with fresh perspectives on the matter. For now, we'll have to make do with other, less direct strategies. Whatever your approach, know that there are tools at your disposal, and with a dedicated approach, you can minimize harmful publicity and, eventually, relegate it to the shadows of second- and third-page results.

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3 Ways SEO Has Changed and What It Means for Your Site

By Mark Renfree

Search engine optimization can at times be a frustratingly mysterious subject. With knowledge of the basics, communicators can analyze and improve their rankings. But sometimes it can seem that no matter what you do, your content and websites plateau outside the top 3 results on Google.

Like almost everything in the digital space, SEO is in a constant state of flux. Driven by Google's mandate to give web searchers the best possible experience, algorithms are continually tweaked to deliver on that promise. The only way for communicators to stay relevant in such a space is to stay informed and always use the latest tactics.

To decode SEO in general and comprehend where it's going, you have to understand where it's been. Allison Fabella, global director of SEO, CareerBuilder and speaker on PR News' upcoming SEO Strategies That Will Help Your Message Find the Right Audience webinar, looks at some of the most significant developments in SEO and what they mean for your sites.

The Evolution of Mobile

Over the past several years, Google has slowly been turning up the dial on mobile as a ranking factor going from a whisper to an in-your-face scream. At the core of all mobile factors is site speed and performance. In 2016 a sluggish site simply can't survive in a competitive landscape. Here's how I see the phasing in of mobile for SEO over time:

- Phase 1 (around 2011): Google implied a preference for responsive/mobile-friendliness
- Phase 2 (Spring 2015): "Mobilegeddon" forced mobile friendliness with diminished rankings for sites who didn't pass the test
- Phase 3 (early 2016): Accelerated Mobile Pages "AMP"—Currently Google's latest "it" feature. With its search results prominently displayed in a carousel above the regular results listing, this is a

giant incentive to make site pages AMP friendly. Originally offered just to publishers, this feature is quickly rolling out to many other industries including e-commerce, travel, recipes, etc.

Enhanced Search Results Displays

The ubiquity of mobile paired with today's immediate gratification culture (who scrolls below the fold anymore?) has made "special" result displays an even bigger prize for SEOs. While not all of these features are new, Quick Answers, Rich Cards, Star-rated reviews (plus other Rich Snippets), and of course, Local are all situated above the regular search results—sometimes in giant boxes—and create an irresistible click opportunity for searchers on the go.

Rank Brain + User Signals

Search engines have always somewhat paid attention to user behavior. However, search activity is more important than ever with the rollout of Google's machine-learning artificial intelligence technology, RankBrain. Known as Google's "Hal," RankBrain is currently considered one of the most important ranking factors and incorporates thousands of sub-signals to get to the heart of users' search intent. And what better (albeit creepy) way to figure out what users want (or don't want) than to carefully monitor their behavior? Some user signals that Google looks for to indicate search result satisfaction:

- Click-through rate from search results
- Time spent on site
- Bounce rate
- Pogo sticking
- Social shares

5 Essential SEO Metrics and 4 Tools to Track Them

By Mark Renfree

SEO can be one of the most powerful tools at a communicator's disposal—if it's used correctly. Having an optimized website will drive valuable free traffic that can be converted into leads, advocates, fans and customers. But SEO can work against a site too, making poorly optimized destinations all but disappear.

One of the bedrocks of an effective SEO strategy is having the right metrics in place. But with the fluid nature of Google's algorithm changes, metrics have to be consistently monitored.

Before the work of monitoring and adjusting an SEO strategy can begin, a baseline needs to be established. Leighanne Stainer, global SEO lead, Cisco, suggests that PR pros track these five metrics to understand how their sites are faring. Keep in mind that this isn't an exhaustive list of important SEO metrics, but these factors will give communicators a solid foundation to start from.

To get the full story about SEO tracking from Leighanne Stainer and learn to develop a robust SEO strategy from experts at Square and CareerBuilder, check out PR News' SEO Strategies That Will Help Your Message Find the Right Audience webinar taking place on Aug. 23 from 1:30-3:00 p.m. EST.

- **Keyword ranking** — This metric will help determine where your site ranks for specific search terms.

- **Organic traffic**

    ○ *Direct*—When a person inputs the site's URL directly into the browser to find your site.

    ○ *Referral*—Any traffic that comes from another source, like social media or links to your content on another website.

    ○ *Search*—Traffic that comes directly from the search engines.

- **Top pages driving traffic**—Look at your most successful pages to see if you can replicate the success elsewhere on your site.

- **Number of pages indexed**—This metric is important to gain a long-term understanding of how specific search engines are indexing your site. Compare results over time to determine if your pages are doing better or worse at drawing in traffic from search engines.

- **Bounce rates**—This measures how many users come to a single page on your site and then leave. This is a tricky metric because users leave for a number of reasons, some of which aren't necessarily the fault of the site. But it can be an important indicator of how people are interacting with your content.

To help gather these metrics, here are four tools that Stainer suggests for SEO tracking:

1. Google Analytics (free)
2. Google Search Console (free)
3. SEMrush
4. Advanced Web Ranking