

Study Sheds New Light on Google's Search Algorithm

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On March 7th, the entrepreneurial-focused site BusinessBolts.com released a fascinating Google algorithms study dispelling a few myths about actual SEO trends. Focusing solely on Google's algorithms, the study has uncovered critical data for business owners looking to maximize their placement on Google search engine results pages (SERPs).

To drill down into the current landscape, the study randomly selected 100 key phrases ranging from two to six words. Next, they analyzed only the first five results in each Google search, creating a test pool of 500 different web pages from which to gather data. Google Adwords ads, images, shopping sets and news site sets were eliminated from the analyzed test cases, ensuring actual web pages alone were studied.

Keywords, Title Tags and Content Length

The study analyzed factors such as the full URL, title tags, headlines, subheadings, word count for body text, images, videos and, of course, backlinks. Only 50% of the top five pages featured the key phrase in their title tag, and only 43% had it in their header. It turns out that, despite the advice of many top SEO firms, less is actually more. Key phrases are obviously critical to set the tone and inform search engines of your content's theme, but overuse of key phrases does not gain sites any additional ranking mojo. The study states, "If you're going to include exact key phrases, you really only need to include them one time." The first main takeaway is therefore a straightforward one: don't over-optimize.

There's also a heavy emphasis on the importance of including your key phrase in either your title or headline (or both, but that's not absolutely necessary). Knowing that overuse of key words doesn't garner higher rankings, remember that using the same words repeatedly makes for awkward reading, and is a surefire way to turn off visitors. The message here is simple: highlight your key words, but write your content in a way that sounds natural. While a search engine might not appreciate copy that flows well, your visitors will.

How much you write also seems to play a role. Web pages ranking in the #1 spot often had a much higher word count than those in the #5 spot, by about 120 words. The study shows that an excellent word count for your body text is about 900. Bear in mind that this particular statistic showed a vast amount of variety. Overall, however, a higher word count does seem to positively impact your SERP rankings.

Images and Video

Does a picture say a thousand words to Google? The answer: not really. Of the 500 ranking pages, the average number of images was seven – but many featured none at all. Videos fared even worse, with a less than one per page average. The findings showed almost no connection to images or rich media in the Google algorithm. Whether examining the #1 or #5 ranked page, the findings were consistent.

Backlinks and Home Pages vs. Internal Pages

Many business owners struggle with obtaining dozens and dozens of qualified backlinks, but is all this networking still super crucial to Google rankings? At first glance, the study seems to indicate the answer is no. Many of the top pages had zero backlinks. But before you abandon all outreach efforts, know that further inspection showed that high ranking pages without backlinks actually had significant links to the domain's homepage. Overall, this is great news for business owners. It means that you don't need to have significant links across the web for all the major pages on your site. As long as you have a nice flow of backlinks to even one core page, your entire site will reap the benefits. But you can't be lazy in this aspect of site building – backlinks are still king.

Although the stats were all over the map, it's clear a significant number of backlinks are needed for a stellar ranking. On average, the #1 ranking site for each key phrase had 662 backlinks, whereas the #5 page for each had just 142. That means the Google's top pages have five times more backlinks than those just a few results down. When it comes to backlinks, as with actual word count, more is still more.

Another surprising reveal from the study is that only 12% of all top ranking pages were homepages. This tells us there is truly an equal playing field for internal pages to rank well too – another burst of good news if perhaps your homepage isn't your strongest landing page. Google doesn't seem to mind.

The Importance of the Social Scene

As expected, one should never underestimate the power of the social stratosphere. Of the pages studied, the highest ranking performers were tweeted on average 371 times. Facebook stats for the top dogs showed an average of 1512 Facebook likes and 988 shares. These are fairly epic numbers. As with backlinks, the difference between the #1 and #5 ranking pages showed a vast gap in the level of sharing. While it's unclear if Google truly tracks social signals in their algorithms, it is abundantly clear that more social sharing means a higher likelihood of an awesome ranking.

While the BusinessBolts study is not enough to bank your business on, they did put significant time and thought into the process, and produced some actual data revealing valuable trends and information. It's critical to analyze cold hard data over the speculation of SEO firms, no matter how brilliant or instinctive their executives may be. Google's algorithms are dynamic and mysterious, but seeing raw facts helps to better shape your successful ranking strategy. The takeaways here are pretty easy to ascertain: write valuable and

keyword rich copy without going overboard, use images as appropriate but without pressure to meet any quota, and continue your efforts to gain credible links en masse. Lastly, it's obvious social networking is completely integral to a respectable ranking, so don't skimp on your social strategy. Most of all, remember that SEO is an ever-changing landscape, so keep your eye out for more factual studies, and never get too comfortable that you know all there is to know.

Producer, game designer and freelance writer, Tina Courtney-Brown has been a bona fide web fiend since she discovered Poetry.com in 1994. Tina's fortés include all aspects of online business, social media, marketing trends, alternative health, digital production and many more. She's a passionate truth-teller, a sincere advocate for the environment, and an obsessive dessert creator. Learn more at [Tina Courtney-Brown's personal website](#).