

Content is the new SEO

Is your brand sending
the right signals?

Creating and managing
brand value™

Interbrand

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Is your brand sending the right signals? Google knows the answer

by Mark Dwyer

Search Engine Optimization. The very term conjures up images of the dark arts—a kind of sorcery wielded by shadowy specialists who sell you the secrets of algorithm manipulation to make your brand appear in Google search results. And SEO worked, to the extent that it *did* make it easier for brands to connect with audiences. Too easily, in fact, because brands could use SEO trickery to rank higher in search results, so that Google would unwittingly link audiences to websites and content that weren't necessarily great experiences. In this scenario, people lose faith in Google and switch to Bing. Google wisely decided to change the game.

Since 2012, Google has been retooling the algorithm that determines whether a brand's content appears in search results, and how high, via its Penguin link penalty filter. Brands can no longer rely on keywords in their content and websites to catch the attention of search engines. Brands that pay for links to their websites are penalized by the new algorithm, which assigns them a lower ranking in search results or even kicks a brand off the list entirely. What does this mean for brands?

SEO as a vertical discipline will soon evaporate. Today brands should think about their digital activity as a key deliverable of their overall marketing strategy. Brands should welcome Google's new rules, because even factoring in the initial investment needed to improve the digital experiences they deliver, they will become far better equipped to anticipate needs, transform desire, generate involvement, and evolve—naturally and responsively—to shifting trends.

How does Google Search—and more specifically, its algorithm—determine the quality of your brand's website experiences and content? It's all about Brand Signals.

Brand Signals

Brand Signals reflect, in a unified fashion, three key measures: the *quality* of your content; the *validity* of links back to your website; and the *level and sentiment* of your social media activity. Let's take a closer look at what constitutes *quality* content.

Content Quality

The *quality* of your content is determined by its *freshness* and *relevance*. As you would expect, *fresh* means the content is up-to-date. How frequently your brand refreshes content is up to you. Just know that when content becomes stale, Google notices. And it penalizes your brand with lower search ranking positions.

Relevance

Relevance refers to how *meaningful* your content is to your audience. To be relevant, content must not only be on topic, it must also align with the customer's journey. For instance, where in the purchase cycle is the reader? Are they contemplating a purchase, or are they considering purchasing the extended warranty?

Validity of Links

Inbound links need to be *earned*, ideally from authoritative online sources. Buying links is likely to get a brand penalized by Google. Your brand is sending stronger signals when respected websites provide their readers with links back to your content.

Social Media

When the quality of your content and audience experiences is high, it follows that more people will endorse, like, retweet, and "+1" your content on social media. Google is looking to users to help it determine what is and what is not great content.

The best audience experiences are characterized by strong signals in all three of these areas. Now it's up to brand owners to meet Google's new requirements. How do brands tackle such a seemingly insurmountable challenge?

Content strategy

The overall purpose of a content strategy is to give you clear guidance on how to deliver the right story, to the right people, at the right time and in the right place. It ensures your brand's values, strategy, and vision come alive in your everyday communications. More specifically, a content strategy helps you *integrate* and *activate* your content over a specified period of time. It is the regular release of smart content that will keep your brand top of mind. Through this process, brand and business insights are rigorously crafted into communications that continually engage your audience on topics that drive consideration. Think of it as adding a publishing department to your brand—one that starts productive, timely conversations about your messages through shareable mediums: social media, blogs, video, infographics, rich email, and more.

A content strategy requires investment, but it will pay off tenfold. Matt Cutts, head of Google's webspam team, encourages brands to stop focusing on search result rankings, and instead commit to creating a "fantastic website that people love and tell their friends about and link to and want to experience." That's the real secret to getting the higher, sustainable rankings brands want so badly.

Put your content strategy to work and let the magic begin.



Mark Dwyer

Mark has over twenty years of experience defining and executing brand expression.

He joined Interbrand in 2011 to lead the growing verbal identity practice in Canada. As an agency-side copywriter and Creative Director, Mark created award-winning campaigns for many Canadian and international brands from various sectors. Before Interbrand, he was a voice director and composer, developing commercial soundtracks and branding mnemonics for many high-profile brands. Mark has scored a television series and a movie, and has directed commercials. He brings this experience to his role at Interbrand, where he crafts brand strategies and brand stories, and oversees the development of names, voice, and messaging for a range of clients.

Mark's client experience includes: McDonald's Restaurants, Corona Beer, British Airways, GM, Ford, BMO, CIBC, RBC, TD, Molson Dry, AT&T, University of Boston School of Management, BASF, Scotiabank, Plan Group Technical Services, FRHI, and Sentry Investments.