WRITING FOR SEO

How to Create Content to Engage Your Audience and Rank on Google

PrinterPresence®

Your website. Your way.

INTRO

Getting noticed is a challenge.

The internet is a busy, crowded place, buzzing with almost 2 billion websites and millions of brands competing for attention. Rising above the clutter and online noise requires a little strategy.

Thankfully, that strategy doesn't require a rocket scientist. Or even a computer scientist. You can create website content that will boost your site in search results and put it on people's radar without a degree in copywriting or any technical expertise. That's why we wrote this—to give you the need-to-knows about writing for search engine optimization (or SEO) and empower you to optimize your site for search if you'd like to do it yourself.

Ready to get in good with Google and watch your website rise? Let's start with the basics.

WHAT IS SEO?

In basic terms, SEO is the practice of optimizing your website's content and technical elements to make your site attractive to search engines so that it appears near the top of the search engine results page, or SERP. (Lots of acronyms, but you'll be speaking the language by the end of this.) Your SEO efforts determine which of your website's pages will rank on search engine results pages—and where.

While several search engines exist, we'll talk mainly about getting in good with Google here. We're not trying to play favorites, but when it comes to search, Google is king.

91%

72%
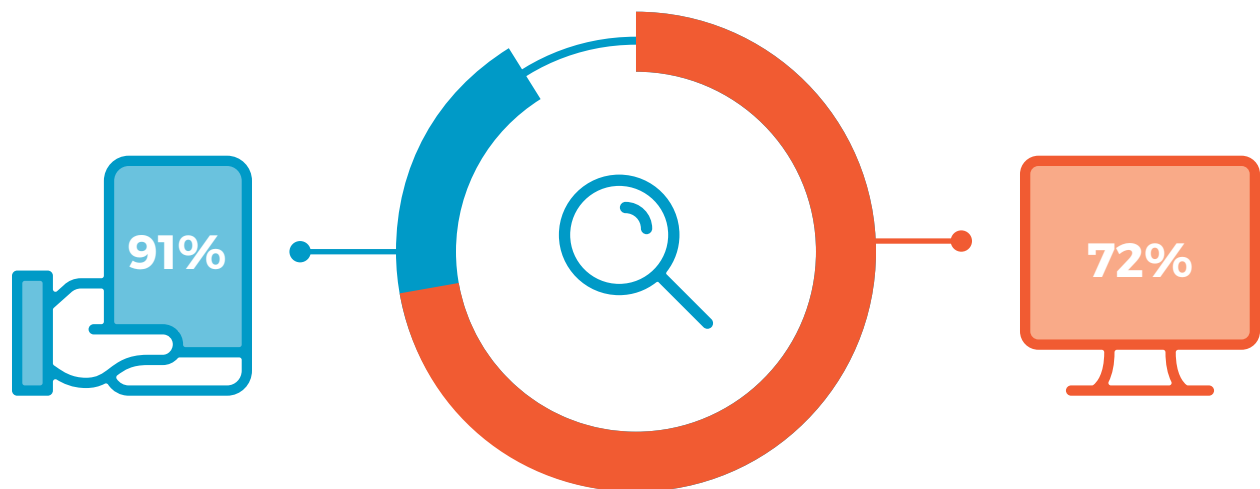
GOOGLE IS THE DOMINANT SEARCH ENGINE.

72.39% of desktop searches come from Google.
91.9% of mobile searches are from Google.

NETMARKETSHARE

Organic vs. Paid

You've probably heard the terms "organic" and "paid" in reference to search, and it's important to understand the difference. Organic search is free and your rankings are dependent on how you've optimized your website content (or created it with best practices for SEO in mind); you're not paying to get your website at the top of the results page. Paid search, on the other hand, is exactly what it says—you pay Google for ads that will put you right up top, so you rule over the results page. The problem with paid search is that users know those top listings are there because brands forked over some cash to be there. That doesn't exactly instill trust in most consumers.

We're going to talk here about how to improve your organic search rankings because one, it doesn't cost money, and two, organic search results are actually more valuable. If you're like most users, you'd rather click on a link that's not labeled "ad." And organic rankings almost always equate to higher quality traffic that's more easily converted to a lead or sale—especially if you show up in the top five organic search results. Several studies have proven that to benefit from the traffic and organic clicks to your website, your business needs to hold a prominent organic position in the results, namely page one.

> *Studies indicate that 71.33% of the time, searchers will click on one of the first ten organic links on the first SERP. Page two and three only get 5.59% of all clicks. On the first page alone, the first five results account for 67.60% of all the clicks and the results from 6 to 10 account for only 3.73%.*
>
> ZERO LIMIT WEB

Before we dive into all the nuts and bolts of writing for SEO, we want to make one thing clear: Google's search algorithms are always changing, but one constant is that *they favor user-friendly content.* Optimizing your website content for search isn't about following a long list of technical do's and don'ts. Much of it is common sense that provides your user with a better experience and more useful content, which is smart to do anyway, regardless of search rankings.

Think of SEO optimization like this: **Creating unique, relevant and valuable web content in your audience's language with a user-friendly website experience that works equally great on desktop, tablet or mobile.** We'll go over a few technical tips later that will help as well, but if you can accomplish that basic goal, you'll be on your way to satisfying both Google *and* your online visitors.

FIVE TIPS FOR WRITING BETTER WEB CONTENT

Whether you have existing website content that you want to improve or you're staring at a blank screen with a blinking cursor, these five basic writing tips will provide a little inspiration and know-how to get you started.

Real talk: If you hate to write—like, it makes you break out in hives, or your palms sweat the minute you touch your keyboard—it might be good to **hire a copywriter** to create your web content. Why put yourself through that stress and agony when there are people who actually love to work with words for a living?

If you *are* up for the challenge (we believe in you!), here's where to start:

1. Think "user first."

When you sit down to write your website copy, who should be at the top of your mind? Hint: Not your company or organization. Not your high school English teacher. Not your boss breathing down your neck. It should be your users—the very people that your website is built for.

What do they need to know? What questions will they have when they come to your website, or what information will they be looking for? How can you educate them? What problems can you solve? These are the questions you want to consider.

A common mistake many brands make is creating a website that's one big online advertisement—it's all about self-promotion. Sure, you do want to explain what you do, what you offer and why you're the best choice. But do that with your user in mind and with an others-centered approach. That's going to warm them up to you much quicker than using your website as one big pat on the back (plus, Google will like it better too).

2. Populate your website's content with the correct keywords.

First, let's define "keyword." It's a "word or phrase that people will type in a search field to help them find what they're looking for." It's really that simple. The trickier part is figuring out which keywords to use on your website in order to rise in relevant search results. That will typically require a little research, which we'll talk about later. The key message here is that keywords are indeed important, and you'll want to sprinkle them liberally throughout your website once you know what they are. Include them in the copy, the headlines—wherever it makes sense and seems natural.

For example, a local humane society might decide to use keywords like pet adoption, family pet, animal in need, rescuing a dog or adopting a dog. These are the terms that people could use when they're searching for a humane society, which are exactly what you want your keywords to be: search terms.

3. But don't go overboard with keywords.

Too much of a good thing is a bad thing in this situation. Using too many keywords amounts to what's known as keyword stuffing, which can hurt your efforts to rank. Low-quality, keyword-stuffed content is not a good SEO strategy; Google will see through it and penalize you for it. Remember the "Google likes what's good for users" sentiment? Shoot for conversational and relevant copy with keywords placed naturally where they fit, not forced into spots where they don't.

4. Be concise.

On the web where users often skim more than they read word-for-word, brevity wins. Include keywords where appropriate, of course, but get rid of filler words and long chunks of text, which can look intimidating or boring.

Some tips on how to stay concise:
- Use more powerful verbs (active words) and fewer adjectives (describing words).
- Keep your sentences short—aim for fewer than 16 words per sentence.
- Eliminate industry jargon and clichés where possible, which usually don't mean much to your audience. The exception is if, in that jargon, there's a keyword you want to rank for—then use it strategically.
- Limit each paragraph to just one idea. Short, meaty paragraphs are easier to skim than long-winded ones, which is how most people read online (as opposed to word-for-word).

5. Break up the page with subheads, sections and bullets.

Formatting your website content with plenty of space and copy breaks helps visitors digest and understand your message, which will ultimately lead to greater conversions on your website. Write relevant content in bite-sized pieces to make it more palatable for busy readers by using formats like these.

BULLETED LISTS

- They're easy for readers to scan.
- They're useful and straight to the point.
- They provide a visual break for your reader.

PHOTO & CAPTION

One word: Instagram. There's a reason people can get lost in that social media platform for an hour—the content is easy to consume. A photo with a caption (or hashtag) is a great way to quickly share something cool about your company or organization.

Q&A PIECES

Q: Need new ideas for your blog?
A: A timely Q&A with a third-party expert can add credibility to your website and mix things up.

INFOGRAPHICS

They're a great way to show stats and visually convey material that might otherwise be boring. They also give you a way to display a lot of info in one place.

These tips give you a good starting point for writing user-friendly, helpful and relevant content for your website visitors. In the next section, we'll take a deeper dive into how to really optimize your content for SEO and make Google sit up and take notice, pushing you higher in search results and increasing the likelihood you'll get found.

SIX SECRETS FOR SEO (AND USER)-FRIENDLY CONTENT

"What's good for Google is good for the gaggle"—we totally just made that up, but it kind of works.

What we're saying, in a less corny way, is what's good for search engines is also good for the masses of people browsing the internet, looking for answers and solutions. So, when you take everything in this section to heart and implement it on your website, you're not only improving your content for search, you're improving your users' experience. SEO optimization is a win-win.

Ready for the big reveal? Here are the six secrets to writing SEO-friendly content.

1. Conduct keyword research.

According to **Moz**, "Keyword research provides you with specific search data that can help you answer questions like: What are people searching for? How many people are searching for it? In what format do they want that information?"

Determining the best keywords or keyword phrases for your company or organization is one of the first steps to successful SEO optimization. You need to know what people are searching for in order to make yourself more findable, which seems like a no-brainer, but plenty of people bypass this part and go directly to the writing stage. That's like skipping your homework all semester, then planning to ace your final exam.

We'd suggest a different strategy. To begin compiling your list of keywords, start here:

1. **Think like a searcher, not like an insider.** If a new pet owner wants to get their kitten spayed, they're not going to search for a vet to do an "ovariohysterectomy"—they probably don't even know that word (we didn't). They're going to use layman's language. "Get my cat fixed" or "veterinarian to spay my cat" or something similar. We all use insider terms at work, depending on our industry; most have their own lingo. But those insider terms rarely make good keywords. Step outside your industry and put your consumer hat on. What words will they use to search for your organization? Use those terms as keywords instead.

2. **Always include your location.** If I live in California, I'm not going to fly to Florida to get my cat spayed. So, I might search for "veterinarian Los Angeles county" to narrow my search and find something close to home. If you rely on local business, like a veterinarian or a restaurant or a print shop would, be sure to include your location on all your web pages.

3. **Look at your competitors.** Others in your industry or space are doing the same kind of keyword research and trying to optimize their web content for SEO too. So, take a peek at their websites—what words are they using? How do they describe their products and services? Pay attention to what your competitors are doing and consider prioritizing the keywords they're ranking for to aggressively compete with them.

4. **Use helpful tools.** Google Keyword Planner is free and useful, however we highly recommend investing in a tool like Moz or SEMrush. These tools will help you perform keyword research accurately and efficiently so you'll be able to judge which keywords will be most effective for your business or organization.

5. **Use long-tail keywords.** Back in the caveman days of search when Google was just learning to crawl, simple terms like "pizza" or "shoes" may have been enough to get your website ranked. Nowadays, those terms have a super high search volume, and the competition is fierce. While you still want to use relevant one-word keywords like that, you'll also want to include what's called long-tail keywords, which are three to four-word phrases that are more descriptive and specific. They don't get the search volume, but they're less competitive, making them easier to rank for. Plus, the leads you get with long-tail keywords tend to be more qualified. In addition to "pizza," you might also use "deep dish Chicago style," or with "shoes," you might add "platform leather sneakers." Look at what you're offering, and hone in on specifics to create long-tail keywords that will work for you.

Once you have your list of keywords in hand, it's time to know exactly how to use them.

2. Be mindful of keyword density.

Here are two important definitions to keep in mind as you optimize your website for SEO:

Keyword frequency: How many times a keyword or phrase appears on a page.

Keyword density: The ratio of the number of times a keyword or phrase appears to the total number of words on the same page.

We mentioned earlier that too much of a good thing is bad, so you'll want to find the sweet spot between using the right keywords enough and using them too much. Paying attention to keyword density will help you avoid keyword stuffing, which Google will dock you for. Technically there is no "ideal" percentage, but we'd recommend staying between 1–2.5%.

Here's an example: We have an article on the Firespring blog called, **Marketing Automation: What It Is and How It Makes Your Work Life Better.** The keyword density for the target keyword phrase "marketing automation" is 2.04%. And we used that phrase in each of these recommended spots—all great places for keywords:

- URL
- <h1> tag
- <h2> through <h6> tags
- Title and description tags (more on these later)
- Start of the page copy
- End of the page copy
- Image ALT tags

Luckily, **there is a tool** to help you check your keyword density, and we'd recommend using it for the key pages on your website. If your percentage checks out to be too high, no worries—just swap out some of those keywords with synonyms or other similar terms.

3. Understand the searcher's intent.

When you determine your keywords, you have to understand your user's language; now it's time to look at their motivation, or intent—not only what they're searching for, but why. When a person types a word or phrase into a search engine, they have a particular goal they want to achieve, or a search intent. In recent years, Google has gotten pretty good at determining user intent, and to keep up, it's important for you to as well. Here are the main four types of search intent:

1. **Informational.** You might be worried about your parent's health, so like millions of people every day, you decide to consult Dr. Google (Disclaimer: Google is not really a doctor, it just plays one on the internet, and we recommend consulting one with the letters MD in their title.) You might type "symptoms of heart disease" in the search field and find that the SERP is filled with answer boxes and webpages containing information about symptoms of heart disease. You're simply looking for information, and that's what Google is serving you.

2. **Navigational.** This is a search where a user is intending to locate and link to a specific website, but they don't know the URL. If you're looking for symptoms of heart disease but you just want to consult one particular source, you might type in "The American Heart Association," and your results will yield a link to the organization's homepage.

3. **Commercial.** Here's where someone is getting ready to plop down some money, honey— or at least, they're in the process of considering it. Commercial intent is when a buyer or donor is doing their research before they make a transaction. If heart disease is an issue that hits close to home for you, you might search for "organizations that help find a cure for heart disease" and get a SERP with a bunch of organizations whose mission is to end heart disease before you decide who to support.

4. **Transactional.** Now it's time to seal the deal. If you're conducting a transactional search, you're serious about parting with some cash, so you might search "donate to The American Heart Association," which will bring up results that will provide you with a direct link to a donation page so you can make your gift.

Take a look at your list of keywords and phrases and enter them one by one in a search engine and study what you see on the SERPs for each. What's the most common intent you see for each term you enter? Then, look at your content. Does it match? If not, adjust your strategy.

CASE STUDY FROM YOAST
Yoast wanted to write an article about website maintenance. Their content strategy called for an informational article on how to keep your website content fresh and your site structure well maintained. However, when they took a step back and analyzed the SERPs for the term "website maintenance," they discovered that, almost exclusively, the results showed companies that worked on technical site maintenance and hosting, with some results stressing the importance of this.

That gave them two important insights: One, many people using the search term "website maintenance" had commercial intent, not informational. And two, to have an article about website maintenance rank, it needed to be completely different than what they'd originally planned, discussing topics like hosting, technical site performance, etc. as that's what searchers were actually looking for when typing in "website maintenance." So, Yoast realized they had to make changes to the article, adapt their strategy and target a keyword better matching informational intent.

4. Craft the perfect headline and supporting subheads.

People read differently on the web than they do on paper. In fact, they don't really "read"—they scan. They want to spot the information that's most relevant to their interests or needs, and then take a deeper dive into the content when they spot something interesting. That's one reason it's so important to write clear, noticeable headings and subheadings—to break up content and label sections so that people can scan to find what they're most interested in.

> *"On the average, five times as many people read the headline as read the body copy. When you have written your headline, you have spent 80 cents out of your dollar."*
>
> DAVID OGILVY, ADVERTISING TYCOON

The second reason, of course, is for SEO. Google pays close attention to your headlines and subheads, and it's smart to write them in a way that's search engine-friendly.

To start, let's talk about your main headline on a page, or the <h1> tag. Think of this as the title of a book. There have been plenty of trends in SEO that have come and gone, but <h1>s have never lost their significance—they play a key role in SEO success. Use these best practice tips to write <h1>s that work:

- Use only one <h1> tag per page.
- Include your target keyword or keyword phrase.
- Stick to just 6–7 words and/or less than 65 characters.
- Give a strong sense of what the content is about.
- Use relevant adjectives.
- Consider using the year if it's relevant to your article.

Next, let's consider <h2> to <h6> tags. These are like chapter titles or subtitles in your book, and they get more specific as the number goes up. To optimize these tags, or subheads, use these tips:

- Further describes the <h1> tag. Be more specific.
- Include target keyword or keyword phrase. Often, long-tail versions of the keyword or keyword phrase can be used here.
- Keep it catchy and tagline-like. If you want to get more creative than you were in the <h1> (because you wanted to include important keywords), your <h2> to <h6> tags are the place for that.

Note: You *can* break things down on your webpage all the way to an <h6> tag, but that doesn't mean you should. It's pretty uncommon for a page to use <h4> tags and beyond. While you do want to break your content down into bite-sized pieces and keep it easy to scan, too many subheads can seem overwhelming and cumbersome and start to look too much like a research paper outline.

That's not the look and feel you're going for, most likely, if you want to engage readers and welcome them into a friendly website.

5. Optimize your title tags and meta descriptions.

My what?

Sorry, we should have issued a warning: Things are about to get a wee bit technical here, and if you're not a tech geek or SEO nerd, your eyes might start to glaze over, which we do *not* want to happen—so hang with us here.

First, let's define these terms:
Title tag: The clickable headline shown on the SERPs.
Meta description: A short summary of a webpage.

Title tags and meta descriptions are the headline and summary that appear on a search engine results page (SERP). They help tell both people and search engines what a specific webpage is all about. So, when you write them, put on your searcher's hat: What will entice searchers to click and visit your webpage?

These tags are likely the first experience someone will have with your website, so you want to use these to make a great first impression. If you were filling out an online dating profile for your business, what would you want to highlight? You know: "If you like piña coladas and getting caught in the rain" . . . that kind of thing. Tell users what you're all about so they know if you're a good match.

Here are some tips on how to write meta tags that work:
- Include your primary keyword in the title tag once and meta description no more than twice.
- Keep your title tags under 60 characters and your meta descriptions under 160 characters.
- Write a unique title tag and meta description for each page.
- Put your keyword near the beginning of each.
- Think of meta descriptions as writing ad copy. Make searchers want to click on your webpage—entice them with the right description.
- Avoid stop words like: a, and, but, so, on, or, the, was, with.

Example: The top 3 results for the phrase "email marketing" are below. You can see how the words "successful" and "easy" might be appealing to users looking for email marketing tips.

mailchimp.com › email-marketing ▾
Email Marketing Strategy and Tips for Successful Campaigns ...
With Mailchimp's flexible **email marketing** templates and intuitive designer, it's easy to send emails that really click. hand reaching into box. What is **email marketing** ...

neilpatel.com › Blog › Email Marketing ▾
A Beginner's Guide to Successful Email Marketing - Neil Patel
Today, you'll learn exactly how to start an **email marketing** campaign from scratch. Remember— you're a guest in their inbox. People are inundated with ...

www.constantcontact.com › email-marketing ▾
Email Marketing Made Easy | Constant Contact
Create **email marketing** campaigns like a pro with our easy-to-use features to design professional, mobile-responsive emails. Start your free trial today!
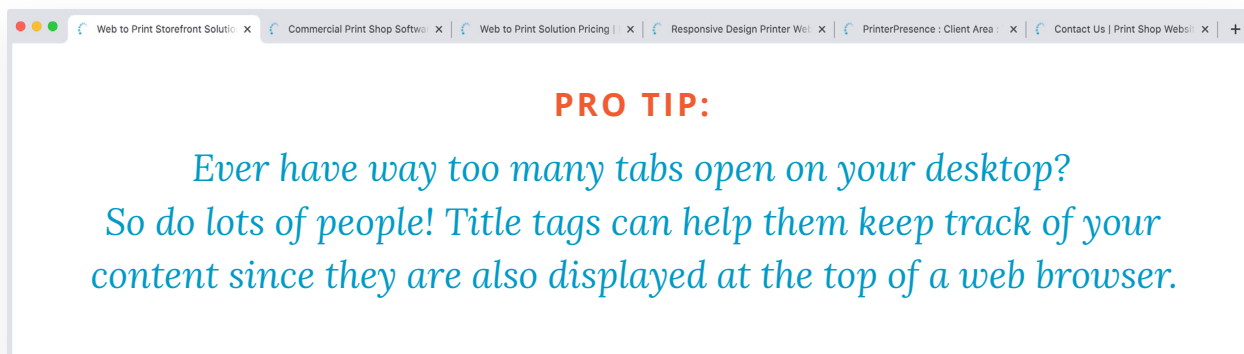
6. Earn quality backlinks.

According to SEO expert **Neil Patel**, "Backlinks are the building blocks of your webpage. They tell Google that you're connected and sociable and that you've got useful content that people can access. This content could be your own or it could be from another author or site."

Page links in general are good; backlinks (or inbound links) are SEO gold.

What is a backlink? In basic terms, it's when another website links to the content on your site.

This is important because it says to both Google and your online audience, "We're trustworthy. We know what we're talking about. We have useful information." It's basically a vote of confidence. Plus, it's one more driver to your website, and can't we all use that? To mine this SEO gold, there are three key things you can do:

1. **Link to relevant content within and outside your site.** You want other websites to link to yours? Be a good internet neighbor, then, and link to other websites when it's appropriate, relevant and valuable for your audience. Also, linking to other pages within your website is good SEO juice, too.

   Tip: Use keywords or phrases for anchor text when you're linking. For example:

   Don't do this: "Click **here** to see our Mother's Day flowers."
   Do this: "Take a look at our **Mother's Day flowers.**"

2. **Aim for high-quality backlinks.** The quality of your backlinks is more important than the quantity. Some backlinks are inherently more valuable than others. Backlinks from trustworthy, high-authority sites are the ones you really want to earn, while backlinks from low-authority, potentially spammy sites fall into the category of "yeah, that's not helpful." Google is smart enough to know the difference. Pro tip: Guest blogging is one of the most effective ways to earn quality backlinks.

3. **Write great content and promote it.** This might seem obvious, but it's worth saying: You can earn high-quality links by creating unique content that people want to link to. This means you need to invest some time and money into creating quality content, but there are so many wins associated with good quality content, that investment is typically worth it. Once you've got the goods, get your content in front of influencers through email, social or simply picking up the phone, and ask them to link from their website to your content, and voila, you've got yourself some backlinks.

Oh—did we mention that Google has confirmed that backlinks remain one of their three most important search engine ranking factors? Their search algorithm changes frequently, but this has remained true over the years: Quality backlinks are your ticket to a big boost on those SERPs.

Bonus Tip: Embrace the power of video.

DID YOU KNOW? There are fewer videos on the web than text-based content. This means it's easier to rank for certain keywords and keyword phrases through an embedded video than an article. Plus, YouTube is the second-largest search engine in the world (just behind Google)! Why not create content that can get picked up by both? Just keep these things in mind:

1. **Craft a thoughtful video title.** Spend time crafting an engaging video title and description and target keywords that people are actually searching for, just like you would for text-based content.

2. **Optimize your video's web page.** Be sure whatever page you place the video on is relevant to the video and still optimized for SEO. Your video isn't going to do the heavy lifting; you still have to make sure your page is search-friendly in order for it to rank.

3. **Don't embed the same video on multiple pages.** You might think, "But this is one kickass video, and I want everyone to see it, so I should put it on all my web pages!" Well, yeah . . . but no. Don't do that, it's like competing against yourself. Pick a page, and make the video shine.

TIME TO RISE

Are you still with us? Great! Because you have just learned everything you need to know in order to optimize your website for SEO and help it rise in the ranks of the search world, and that is going to get more eyes on your brand. Can we get a "heck yeah!"?

We'll reiterate what we've tried to make very clear throughout the e-book: If you create a website that's optimized for your users, Google will like it as well. They're all about serving up the search results they think are most relevant and helpful to searchers, so if you create your web content with a laser-focus on your users, chances are good that Google will find favor with you.

One last thing: You'll find a four-point checklist that you can review periodically to make sure that your website remains optimized for SEO over time. SEO optimization is never a "set it and forget it" endeavor; Google makes sure of that with its always-changing search algorithms. Also, it's important to regularly check and review your website content, anyway, and make changes that will improve conversions, bring clarity to your messaging and evolve along with your business or organization. Keep it handy, and use it often.

CHECKLIST

SEO Copywriting: A Four-Point Checklist to Further Your Efforts

According to Forrester Research, 93% of online experiences begin with a search engine. Put simply, search engine optimization (SEO) is vital to your organization's success.

Implementing the basics—keyword research, density, search intent, headlines, title tags and meta descriptions, backlinks and video—is a fantastic start. But be sure to follow this checklist and mark off the boxes around every three months to be sure that your findability factor is as high as possible.

☐ **Monitor your KPIs (key performance indicators).** Your KPIs will tell you which pages could use some extra love. Pay particular attention to organic search traffic, impressions, click-through rate (CTR), average time on page and links. Webpages with low numbers for these metrics are where you'll want to spend your time and energy.

☐ **Stay on top of your competitors.** Content marketing and SEO is just like in any other area of your organization in that you need to keep an eye on your competitors. What keywords and keyword phrases are your competitors ranking for? What types of content are they creating? Video? Blog articles? Quizzes? Guides? See what they're doing and level up.

☐ **Re-optimize your existing content.** Are you following best practices and still not receiving the results you need? Take another look at your existing content. Is it accurate and up to date? Does your content match the searcher's intent? Try ranking for other keywords with the content you already have. And really, if you hate to write, find someone who doesn't—it'll make all the difference in the tone and voice of your content.

☐ **Implement on-page SEO tactics.** With any content that you update or re-optimize, always update your on-page SEO tactics. Put your new primary keyword in the page's URL, toward the front of the title tag, at least once in the meta description and in the alt text for your images. It might sound like a lot of work, but you can do all that quickly, and it will make an enormous difference in where you rank on the SERP.

If this all sounds like more work than you want to tackle or your focus is on other things, no worries—we can help. At Firespring, we eat SEO for breakfast (lunch and dinner); it's a part of our everyday routine, and we make a point to stay updated on what Google's doing as much as we can.

So, you don't have to do this all alone. Partner with **Firespring's SEO experts**, and we'll get you on your journey to getting found today.