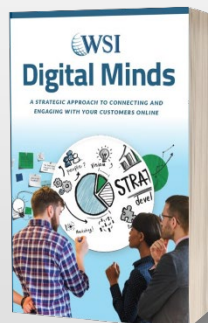




DIGITAL MINDS CHAPTER 9

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF SEO AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN YOUR SEARCH STRATEGY

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The following is a chapter from WSI's 3rd book, *Digital Minds: A Strategic Approach to Connecting and Engaging with Your Customers Online*. If you'd like to read the book in its entirety you can purchase a copy on Amazon.com here:

<https://bit.ly/wsibook3>

You may be wondering why I combined the topics of SEO and social into one chapter. After all, aren't they two distinct digital marketing tactics, each with their own goals and strategies? The truth is, both SEO and social media play connected roles in how your target audience finds, researches, and interacts with your brand.

In the early days of the internet, your prospects may have only opened Google to search for your company or its products and services. But this isn't the case anymore. Today, your prospects are answering their questions directly on the search engine results page. They're asking Siri or Alexa for information. Or they're checking you out on social media to see what others are saying about you.

In this chapter, we'll explore how SEO and social media have changed the way you are being found online and what you can do to improve your search strategy.

Quick Google History Lesson

Do you remember the first time you heard the phrase "SEO is dead"? It seems the digital marketing industry is always making a "death" announcement for one tactic or another. And SEO (search engine optimization) has certainly taken its fair share of hits over the last decade. But could there be a smidgen of truth in this statement?

In 2011, the SEO community was introduced to the Google "Zoo"—a collection of monumental algorithm changes that Google affectionately named after cute zoo creatures presumably to help soften the blow and impact they would have on our optimization strategies and results. Google has always tweaked its algorithm, but these aggressive shifts changed the SEO landscape as we knew it.

The first change to be introduced was Google Panda. Its purpose was to give priority in search visibility to high-quality sites by lifting them higher in search engine results pages (SERPs), while pushing lower quality sites, well, lower. Panda seemed to crack down on thin content, content farms, sites with high ad-to-content ratios, and many other quality issues. In short, Panda was about trust!

In 2012, we met Google Penguin. Its mission was to penalize webspam (black hat SEO) and sites with spammy, unnatural backlinks, artificial linking priority in search visibility and keyword stuffing. As a result, shady linking practices started to vanish, and website owners started working hard to earn their links.

In 2013, we were introduced to Google Hummingbird, or what most in the SEO industry called "the destroyer of rankings." Hummingbird's simple objective was to understand a searcher's query better and match it to more relevant results. Content becomes King!!

I don't bring these past changes up for a history lesson, but to remind us we need to understand the past to prepare for the future. At its core, Google wants to provide the most accurate, up-to-date, and relevant results to each search query—regardless of where or how the query is conducted.

The underlying truth is SEO tactics and strategies evolve, and yes, sometimes die. What worked yesterday doesn't necessarily work in Google's world today. As marketing professionals, business owners, and entrepreneurs, we need to prepare for what the future holds if we want to remain competitive.

On-SERP SEO

The way we receive information and the technology that delivers it is changing rapidly. Today, SEO is about showing up regardless of how or where people search. The search landscape is no longer limited to just websites. That's why adopting an organized approach to SERP marketing, and On-SERP SEO is critical.

Optimizing for search engine results pages (SERPs) isn't a new concept. However, it is one that is often taken lightly. Page titles and meta descriptions were the main focus of an optimization strategy for the longest time. In 2018, Rand Fishkin, Co-founder of Moz and a leader in the field of SEO, stated that the future of SEO is in the SERPs. He said:

"On-SERP SEO is, in my opinion, the most important trend in our field. A few years from now, we could see the vast majority of searches ending on Google's result."

This change in search behavior presents some obvious challenges as well as undeniable opportunities. Here are the main things you should focus on as it relates to on-SERP SEO.

- **Dominate as much page one real estate as you can.** This includes paid ads, featured snippets, knowledge panels, maps, videos, and images.
- **Optimize, control, and influence any or all content on SERPs.** This includes earned media like reviews and paid media such as Google Ads.
- **Dominate top positions.** This will improve your search appearance, brand awareness, and clickthrough rates.
- **Generate more organic traffic.** Focus on specific keywords and optimize your multimedia content for these keywords.



Figure 21: Search Engine Results Page

Now that we understand the basic concept of On-SERP SEO, what we really need to work on as marketers and businesses is our mindset. We need to factor in certain challenges such as the possibility of lower clickthrough rates and make it up by capitalizing on the growing presence of featured snippets, sitelinks, and other media available on the search engines.

Featured Snippets

Google is now showing information in the form of featured snippets, also known as “answer boxes.” A featured snippet’s goal is to give immediate answers to a search query without the need to click through to a website. A featured snippet is a small list of answers to a searcher’s question or, often, a block of questions and answers pulled from a webpage. Featured snippets are also referred to as “position zero” as they are shown above position #1 of the organic results at the top of the page.

Google shows these snippets in a few different ways:

1. Paragraph featured snippet (as seen below)
2. Numbered or bulleted lists of answers
3. Table-style featured snippets
4. Video clips

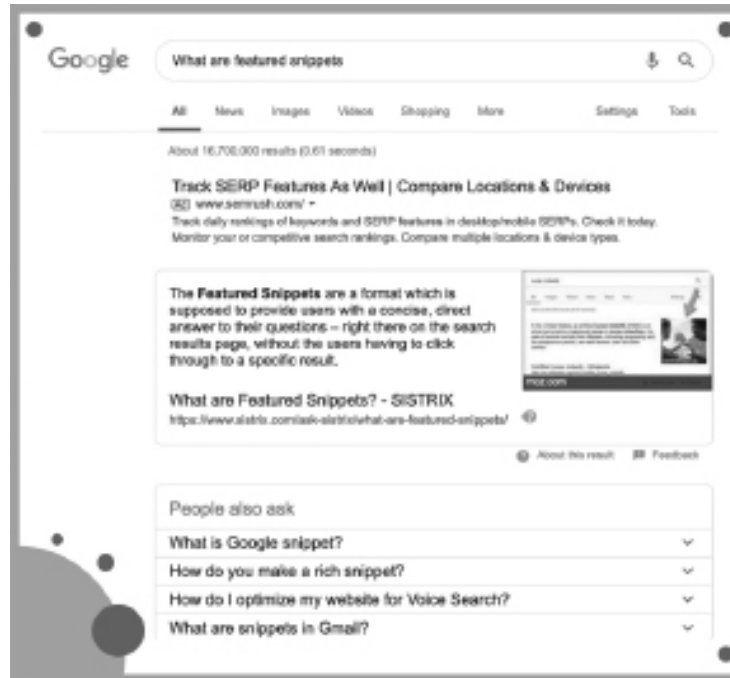


Figure 22: A Featured Snippet

Why Are Featured Snippets Important to Your Overall SEO Strategy?

The latest data on Google clickthrough rates from Jumpshot (2018) shows an overwhelming amount of mobile-based searches result in no clickthroughs to a webpage. Another study put out by Ahrefs.com, showed Google displays featured snippets in almost 12% of all their search queries.

Zero-clicks in the SERPs is a by-product of Google's ability to continually adapt to searchers' behavioral patterns, which are influenced by our use of new technologies. In this case, the change is primarily fueled by exponential year-over-year increases in mobile-based browsing and voice searches.

Achieving snippets, however, is no easy task, and the strategies required to produce results are built on a solid SEO foundation. Yes, the fundamentals still matter! Ranking for featured snippets is much easier if your site is already ranking on page one of Google. In fact, and according to Ahrefs (2017), 99% of featured snippets pages already rank on the first page of Google.

Top Five Tactics to Achieve Featured Snippets

1. Use your target keyword with a question. Most paragraph snippets are returned by search queries which start with a question like "Where," "Why," and "How." Then, do a great job answering these questions.
2. Keep your answers short, concise, and to the point. Try answering these questions in 40 to 80 words.

3. Include images on a page where the headline and URL match the image target keyword. Be strategic in choosing the appropriate file size, file names, alt tags, and captions.
4. Use an inverted pyramid writing style. This approach starts with the lead (any information that is essential to understanding the question) and then gets into details (supporting or secondary information like statistics, quotes, and context). Finally, it finishes with less important information (these details are “nice-to-have” but not essential to the big picture).
5. Add structured data like schema mark-ups when appropriate.

Featured snippets are dominating the SERPs, and the sites that earn snippets all have one thing in common: they provide great information. If you want to influence the way your target market obtains your information, then earn a spot at position zero and put yourself ahead of your competitors.

Voice Search

It's an obvious fact that you can never really hold too much real estate on page one. As marketers and business owners, we need to align our SEO strategies with the technologies being used today to obtain information. Among the fastest, trendsetting technologies to hit the market in the past few years are digital assistants and the mainstream adoption of voice search.

No longer just a fascinating idea seen in science fiction movies, voice search, and voice answer via artificial intelligence (AI) are now part of our everyday lives. It truly is blowing up the way we get our information, and how we, as marketers need to be conducting SEO.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, SEO is about being relevant in whatever way people are searching, and today, this has everything to do with voice. No longer is it just about getting eyeballs on pages, but our ears might just be fueling the SEO of the future.

Brands now must think about what they want to sound like and not just how they look on pages. Although voice search has been around since 2011 when Siri made her debut, users had frustrating experiences with the technology in its earlier days. Many of us laughed and joked about it. And I don't think any of us predicted the full impact it was going to have on search marketing today.

The use of these “smart speakers” and their AI assistants started with simple commands like “What time is it?” or “What's the weather like?” Today, people conduct complex conversational searches mostly beginning with the how, where, when, who, why, and can. This change in how we search is due to the spot-on accuracy of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) driving these devices.

This is yet another great example of information being delivered to us from websites without actually having to visit a website. It demonstrates how technology influences our behaviors—and what business owners and organizational leaders need to do to adapt.

How Does Our Search Strategy Need to Change Today to Be Effective in The Future?

Voice search is disrupting the current digital marketing landscape. We need to take action today to pivot with the changes to come. Voice search is becoming conversational, meaning our searches are more elaborate. We're no longer entering queries like "online sales training." Instead, we ask, "What is the best online sales training course to help me close more sales?" It's now less about the keywords, but how the keywords are being used.

Understanding how we use voice search is as much a part of the overall strategy as the tactics themselves. Common sense will help guide us through some easy steps we can take to ensure that the AI that runs voice search finds us. Here are some guidelines for optimizing your content for voice search.

Mobile-friendliness

Since all voice searches are conducted on smartphones and smart speakers, ensuring your website is as mobile-friendly as possible is key. Remember, just because your site is responsive doesn't mean it's mobile-friendly in Google's eyes. Have you noticed the "Mobile Usability Issue" warnings being sent out lately through Google Search Console (GSC)? Take them seriously and correct the issues.

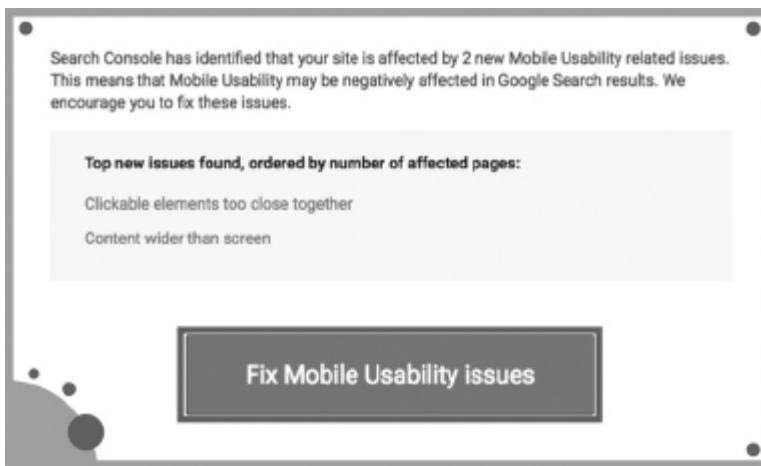


Figure 23: Google Search Console

Keyword research

Yes, forever and always, excellent keyword research is instrumental in any successful SEO strategy. But if you've been overlooking the power of long-tail keywords, then you might be coming up short. As mentioned, voice searches are conversational and more natural sounding, so it makes sense that long-tail phrases are taking the place of their shorter counterparts.

Appear in high-profile directories

Directories like Google My Business, Bing Places, Yelp, Yellow Pages and others like it are an absolute must if you want to compete in the voice search space. Most voice searchers are looking for local results. In fact, 46% of daily voice searches are for local businesses (BrightLocal, 2018). Therefore, having these directories completed, listed, and consistent will give you the best chance of competing.

Utilize FAQs

As search engines are turning into short answer engines, the way we position our content has never been more important. If customers are asking more questions, we need to be answering more questions on our webpages. Questions in the header tags and answers in the body is a great place to start. FAQ pages are also beneficial. Identify the most frequently asked questions in your industry and give short, clear, and concise answers.

Keep increasing your domain authority

Google will most likely always give preference to websites with high domain authority. The better you do at SEO, the better your voice results will be. Keep increasing traffic to your website, building quality links, and producing amazing content.

Keep up with changes

As marketers, it's obvious we need to keep abreast of the changes in search behavior. Technology is only going to evolve, and the devices we use will keep changing, but what will always remain the same is the end game. We want visibility in the search engines, however, or whatever it looks like.

Social Media: How It's Influencing Consumer Decisions

Now, let's switch gears a bit and get into how social media impacts the way your products or services are being found online.

Unless you live under a rock, you know about social media. As business owners and marketers, we use social media in a strategic sense to increase leads and drive traffic to our sites. Social media helps us develop trust with our audience and enhance brand recognition. We even use it to spy on our competitors (don't say you haven't done it, too!)

But do we really understand how social media influences consumers' decisions? Group influence is widely known as one of the key factors affecting consumer behavior. Each member of society is a member of different groups, and as individuals, we find commonality with these groups and model many of their values, attitudes, and trends. These groups we associate with influence our purchasing decisions, and never in our lifetime have our groups been so connected.

It's strikingly apparent how much influence social media has had on consumer behavior and its subsequent impact on business. *Knowing* this is one thing; *understanding* how to leverage it is another.

Nothing sells products like endorsements from the right people. In the world of social media, we call these social celebrities "influencers." Right now, Instagram and YouTube are the most popular platforms for influencer marketing. Chances are, you can't get too far down your feeds or channels without seeing someone you follow endorsing or using a brand. It could be a celebrity, friend, family member, or blogger, but regardless, people strongly connected to their audience can powerfully influence perceptions of brands or products. For this reason, the majority of brands are looking to allocate more of their marketing budgets to influencer marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2019).

What Is a Social Influencer?

An influencer is simply someone who commands a substantial following on social media. Think 100K+ followers. Micro and Nano influencers are those who command a smaller following, roughly 1K to 99K, a number that is smaller but still large enough to impact consumer behavior. These micro/nano influences are often local, and for sale at rates SMBs can afford. The higher the number of followers, generally, the higher the price tag.

Social influencers understand social media, the psychology that makes it tick, and how to attract maximum exposure and reach. Regardless of whether these influencers back their posts up with a financial "boost," their following is usually large enough to influence the group who follows them. Influencers are everywhere, whether you're a clothing designer, have a beauty line, an app, a recipe to share, or a product targeting a specific demographic. Social influencers have the bandwidth to impact purchasing decisions and contribute to the "bandwagon effect." They are also providing brands with another search channel and way for customers to find and learn about products or services.

How Can Small to Medium-Sized Businesses (SMBs) Utilize Influencer Marketing?

If you're reading this book, you're likely an SMB or a digital marketer who works for a larger brand or company. How can "smaller players" like us leverage influencer marketing?

Believe it or not, when it comes to trusted and highly regarded influencers, consumers are not looking to celebs for guidance, but rather everyday people who command a significant following. In fact, according to a survey put out by Collective Bias (2016), an agency who specializes in influencer marketing, 30% of consumers are more likely to buy a product when recommended by a local influencer (nano influencer) who understands its followers.

Unlike celebrities and big names that have many followers, nano influencers may have only a few thousand. This smaller circle makes them appear more credible and trustworthy, and ordinary people can relate to them easily.

That is why brands want them on their side. For a fee, these influencers will promote products and services on social media.

For small businesses and marketers, nano influencers provide you with an audience interested in your brand's unique benefits and provide the opportunity to increase your brand's social exposure. To find nano influencers, research your industry's niches for popular hashtags and study other companies like yours who have engaged social influencers. But remember, it's important to ensure that the influencer's audience matches your target market. Nano influencers are driven by their eagerness and enthusiasm to comment on content that is similar or complementary to their own. The relationship between influencer and brand is symbiotic. The influencer gets to grow their following and become renowned in their niche, while the brand gets more traffic to their content by connecting with the influencer's audience.

Not quite ready to jump on the influencer bandwagon? Social media can also influence consumer behavior simply by getting your friends to discuss a certain product they've purchased. It's a well-known fact consumers' purchasing decisions are highly influenced by their friends' social posts. Think about it, if you're undecided about a particular product and a close friend has reviewed it, would it sway your decision?

As marketers, we need to be looking for ways to encourage conversations on social media. Developing creative ways to get your audience chatting about your brand or product on social media will certainly influence people's opinions. Using the brand and product-specific hashtags is a great way to expand your reach and be found by people doing their searching on social media. These should not only be promoted in social media, but on websites, in stores, anywhere else you can attract eyeballs on it.

Is Social Media the Next Search Engine?

I personally don't feel that social media is going to replace traditional search engines any time soon. I will say, however, that we do need to recognize that our audiences are no longer just using social media as a social forum.

People are researching brands, investigating company cultures, reading comments (which act as reviews), and searching for specific products on social media. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn are social search engines and need to be thought of as such. How your brand is perceived on social media is as important as how it's viewed on traditional search engines. This perception is particularly important since Google includes social media pages in its search results.

Let's look at ways people use social search and how we, as marketers and business owners, can learn and capitalize on these opportunities. Here are examples of instances when a consumer may turn to social media to conduct their search for information.

- Ready to re-decorate? Pinterest is a great place to learn how to build a fireplace mantle.
- Watching your favorite TV show? Twitter might be where you turn to search or follow a trending hashtag.

- Curious about whether the contractor you are choosing is the right one? Facebook can provide a plethora of valuable information, such as chatter, reviews, and images.
- Want to learn which fashion is on-trend? Instagram has it!
- Looking for a restaurant and how they stack up against others? Compare and contrast on Yelp.

Google has even created a search engine called Google Social Search, which is dedicated to helping you find content created by your social circle. Here you can search as I did below and get the social profiles you need to continue your investigation. See how they rate, what their customers are saying about them, and what types of content they are posting. Gone are the days of just having to take someone’s word for it. Now, you have dozens or even hundreds of references before you make a purchase. As for brands, having a social media strategy is no longer a luxury but a must-have. Beyond that, include a reputation management strategy in your social mix to keep your brand healthy and positive online.

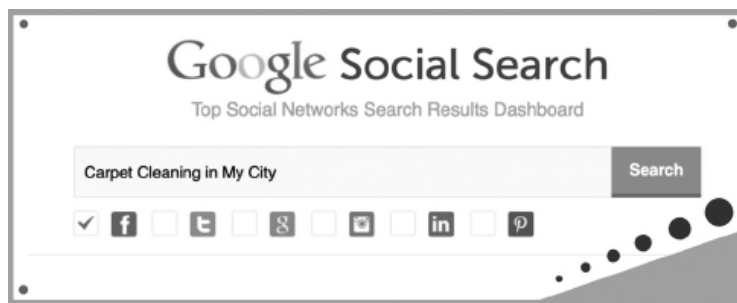


Figure 24: Google Social Search

Social media has revolutionized the way we market our goods and services by putting consumers at the center of business. It enables you to better communicate with your consumers by allowing them to interact with your brand in a social way. Social media and marketing are united! Brands cannot properly market anymore without adding social to the mix.

Social media is part of our everyday lives. It greatly influences our decisions, either positively or negatively. There are no gatekeepers. It gives businesses an equal voice. It connects us in a way we are still only beginning to understand. We spend countless hours a week swiping through our timelines, and we are driven, almost guided, to pages and websites all with the intent to convert us to purchase. For this reason, marketers have to understand how social media is impacting the way consumers are searching for information and influencing their buying behavior.

In Closing

The search behavior of your prospects and customers is changing regularly: on-SERP SEO, featured snippets, voice search, social media, and something new tomorrow! Keeping pace means you'll need to adapt your search strategy to reflect the new online landscape by:

- Creating mobile-friendly content aimed at answering consumer questions
- Anticipating growth in voice searches with clear and concise answers to frequently asked questions
- Recognizing that social media platforms are leading search engines and incorporating SEO best practices on Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter, and Yelp
- Exploring ways to align with social influencers and nano/micro-influencers to build awareness and sales

The smartest search strategies are those that recognize SEO and social media are best utilized in tandem, working together to create value and provide relevance to your target audience.

TIP: The search landscape is constantly changing. To keep up with the latest search engine marketing trends and best practices, visit www.wsiworld.com/book-resources.

About the Author

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Mark Jamieson has more than 20 years' experience in sales and marketing. Mark and his wife Kimberly are the owners and managing partners of WSI eStrategies, an award-winning digital marketing agency in Ottawa, Canada. Mark specializes in a holistic approach to SEO, strategy development, and LinkedIn social selling training. He has worked with organizations like the Government of Canada, embassies and large private companies throughout Canada, the US, and overseas. Leveraging the internet and its many unrecognized opportunities, Mark and his team help their clients establish, expand, and excel at business, no matter what the industry.

About WSI

For 25 years, WSI has been providing digital marketing services and comprehensive marketing strategies to businesses of all sizes and across various industries. We are the largest network of digital marketing agencies around the world.

We are a full-service digital marketing agency that helps elevate your online brand, generate more leads and sales, and improve your overall marketing ROI. Our Digital Marketing Consultants use their knowledge and expertise to make a difference for businesses all around the world.

We don't believe in the "one-size-fits-all" approach to digital marketing. Instead, we take the time to understand your organization and customers so we can recommend a strategy based on your individual business needs. When you invest in any of WSI's digital marketing solutions, you'll have some of the top minds in the industry, contributing to your goals and vision.

You have a vision for your business. We can help make it happen. Reach out; we're happy to help.

