SEO: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

BLU FLAMINGO

Introduction

The longer we work in the world that is now called digital marketing, it's becoming glaringly obvious that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

That's the point of this whitepaper: in order to get to the top of search engines and make sure searchers are finding you instead of your competitors, the same tactics that have worked for years are still the ones that work today.

Now, that's not to say things aren't changing. They are.

At the epicenter of all these changes is one simple fact that has been the case from when the Internet was created, and you don't need a chart or industry statistics to prove it:

The primary reason that people are consuming digital information at such a rapidly increasing rate is that they find it useful and trustworthy.

In spite of all the jokes about not believing what you read on the Internet, the truth is the large portion of digital information people find and use online is trustworthy. This also means that search engines like Google, Yahoo and Bing are doing a good job of delivering trustworthy, relevant results when people search for information.

Every client we talk to wants to know what it's going to take for them to get in front of people searching for what they provide. Unfortunately, it's not a simple explanation for a few reasons. In this whitepaper we're going to do our best to answer that question by taking a close look at the recent trends in search engine optimization. We'll also share with you our insider tips that might just launch you one step ahead of your competitors.

But first, since we started out this whitepaper by saying "the more things change, the more things stay the same," I want to share a few specific things that we've learned which will help set the stage for the strategy discussion later to come.

Change is Constant

The very nature of the Internet and how we use it continues to evolve at a rapid pace, and there is a constant flow of new technologies hitting the market.

Need proof?
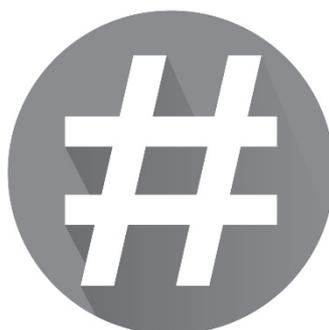
#hashtag

Chances are 5 years ago you had no idea what a hashtag was! Today you still might not know exactly what they are, but you've definitely heard of one.

The point is that continued learning and improvement is a requirement in order to stay relevant in an increasingly competitive digital environment.

Fundamentals Still Work

All of the basic SEO strategies we've been doing for years are still highly effective and they really haven't changed. I refer to them as SEO blocking and tackling.

These strategies include:

- Well optimized meta data with keywords (and location for local businesses)

- Well written, original and interesting content

- Good site structure including easy to navigate pages

- Using free tools provided by search engines to monitor website performance

You Can't Fool Google

This is another one of those rules that doesn't change. No one fools Google and gets away with it…at least not for long. Over the years the schemes have come and gone, and those who jump on the bandwagon usually see short term gains followed by long term losses.

No one can ethically promise you first page organic placement on search engines no matter how convincing their sales pitch might sound. And if you choose to bend the rules, chances are you'll get burned.

Relevance and Trust Are Hard to Build

Every time someone types in a search phrase, search engines have to sort through millions of potential results in order to serve up those they deem are best. How is this done and why do certain sites show up higher than others? Let's do a quick review.

If you were to sum up the job of a search engine in one sentence it would be this:

Give users the most relevant and trustworthy results for a given search.

That's it.

Let's use an example to illustrate the point.

Remember when Robin Williams died? The story was everywhere.

If you did a Google search for "Robin Williams suicide," what type of sites would you expect to find near the top:

- News sites like Huffington Post or USA Today with in-depth reviews of the story and his life; or

- Small blogs who talk about the same story

This isn't meant to demean small blogging sites. Rather, it's to illustrate that people expect to see sources they trust for a given type of search – and in this case, it's news sites. News sites are trusted. However, your website that's only been up for a year doesn't enjoy the same trust, and you have to build that over time.

You Are Being Graded on a Curve

Professionals who have been in the industry for any length of time will acknowledge this fact: you can execute the exact same SEO strategy on two different sites in two different verticals and see varying results.

The reason is Google (and the other search engines) grades you on a curve.

The Headmaster at the high school my boys attend is an English professor and he loves challenging people with new words. Recently he chose this word for a lesson:

Serendipity:

The occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way.
Or put another way…a "happy accident."

Applying this to the digital marketing world, if your goal is to rank for searches related to something less competitive, say "raising pink fluffy caterpillars", SEO is going to be a much easier task. That's because there just aren't a lot of people who are competing for this space on the Internet.

It's quite common in niche industries or certain professional services to have an easier time getting online visibility for less competitive phrases.

Some might call it good SEO. I call it "serendipity."

Alternatively, if you are a divorce lawyer in Dallas, TX, your vocabulary word might be "misfortune."

Some clients have the misfortune of being in a highly competitive industry with well entrenched competitors, and the same strategy which worked for "pink fluffy caterpillars" may not show any results for our poor divorce attorney.

It's important to understand this concept because it affects:

- The strategy you choose

- How long you can expect before seeing results

- How much it's going to cost for you to get meaningful visibility

The bottom line is that you've got to understand what you're up against because for every potential search result, you're being graded on a curve.

Everyone Does It: Crawl, Walk, Run

Impatience seems to be another one of those things that never changes.

Customers come to us and want to know how long it will take to get to the top of search results by tomorrow. Never mind the fact that they don't have a website yet and their competitors have been investing in digital marketing for 10 years.

The notion of "crawl, walk, run" has strong relevance to digital marketing and in particular to SEO, because you can't begin running so to speak unless you've "crawled" and "walked" first.

What does this look like from a process standpoint? We'll take a closer look in the next section, but the big picture is that you can't jump ahead in the process which looks something like this in most cases:

- Keyword Research

- Competitive Analysis

- Website Optimization

- Address Domain Authority

- Content Strategy

- Social Media Strategy

- Reporting

The AdaptiveSEO Solution

Over the last few years our search behaviors have evolved as our ability to access the Internet on mobile devices has become easier.

This "evolution" of search behavior is the basis of WSI's proprietary approach to search engine optimization. We call it WSI AdaptiveSEO™.

At the heart of WSI's AdaptiveSEO™ methodology are the core fundamentals we touched on earlier. After those initial steps are completed, the focus shifts to building on those fundamentals with strategies like content marketing, domain development and social media. Reporting is always the top element of the strategy as good reporting allows for informed decisions.

The reason we've chosen to call it *adaptive* is while the fundamentals are set, we select the appropriate individual strategies so that we can adapt to each business we work with, their industry and their competitive environment.

Keyword and Competitive Research

Choosing the right keywords is a critical part of any SEO strategy. This has been the case for years and will never change.

Keyword research is a fascinating topic and can potentially be very complicated, especially for large website projects. However, you can distill the core elements of good keyword research into the following categories:

Evaluating Keywords

The first priority is evaluating keywords. A few of the factors to take into consideration include:

Activity Levels

It's always interesting to see the differences between what a customer thinks are busy keywords and which are not. Another good tip is to look for phrases that searchers actually use as opposed to industry terms. For example: "pest management" is an industry term which is searched considerably less than "pest control."

Trends

Tools like Google Insights show trends over time for a given topic. This can be incredibly helpful to make sure you're not pursuing an area of diminishing interest and missing out on breakout opportunities.

Commercial Intent

We look for modifiers that are commercially viable rather than research related. For instance, "pest control" is a less commercially valuable phrase than "pest control companies" for obvious reasons.

Identify Long tail Phrases

In almost every research project, we find that shorter phrases hold more search traffic than longer ones. Consider the case of legal professionals. The phrase "lawyer" shows high search volume and might show a variety of results in local markets. However, a phrase such as "collaborative divorce attorney" indicates an entirely different type of search intent. These long tail phrases, while not as busy, are incredibly important to identify.

Once you've created your list of targeted keywords, the next step is to build a strategy to pursue them. More on that in the next section.
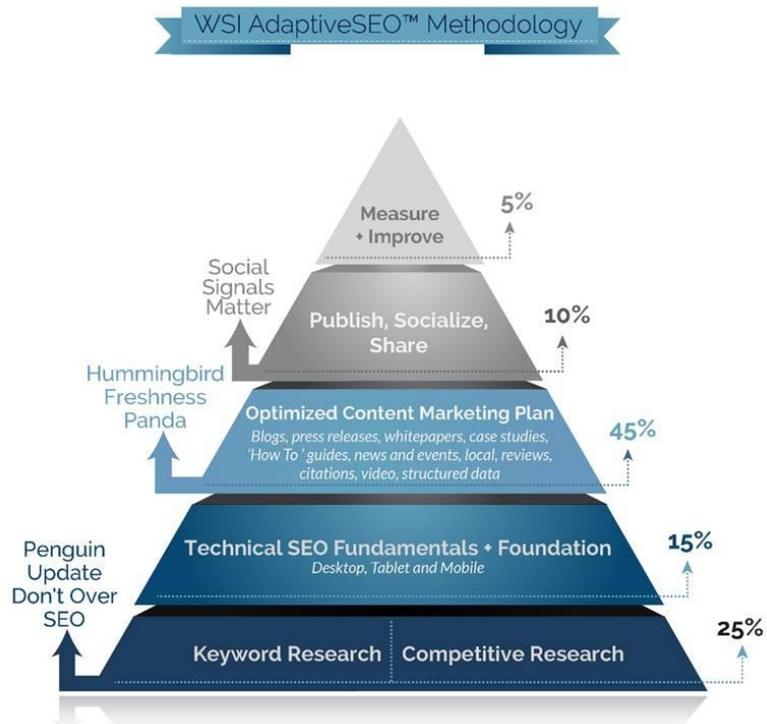
Competitor Review

Almost everyone agrees that imitation is the highest form of flattery, and you can certainly learn a lot from studying and imitating those who are ahead of you in search results.

Typically speaking, we perform a competitive analysis on three to five of the top websites for a given search result in order to better understand:

- What keywords they are using

- The type of content strategy they are employing

- What types of sites link to them

- How are they utilizing social media (if at all)

- Use of paid search advertising

By gathering this type of information, you can get a clear picture of the effort required to match or overtake your competitors.

Technical AdaptiveSEO Fundamentals

Once your keyword research and competitive analysis are complete, it's time to shift focus to your website. The primary goal of website optimization is not to trick search engines, but rather to help them easily understand what your site is about and properly categorize it.

WSI uses an exhaustive internal checklist for website optimization, but the high points are as follows:

- Review website for good site structure (navigation, etc.)

- Assess the mobile experience

- Use best practices for on page optimization

    o   Page titles and descriptions

    o   On page content

    o   Sitemaps and robots files

- Evaluate website content for areas of expansion and improvement

- Fine tune conversion elements of the website (calls-to-action, etc.)

Mobile SEO

These days, mobile affects every facet of digital marketing, and SEO is no exception. When Google updated their algorithm to start using mobile-friendliness as a ranking signal, they had the

betterment of the site user experience in mind. In fact, in the developed world, more searches are conduct on mobile than a desktop. Which means ensuring your website is built and optimized for Mobile SEO is no longer a "nice-to-have", it is an absolute must.

As part of our AdaptiveSEO methodology, we have a checklist of all the requirements a site needs to have to in order for it to be considered mobile-friendly.

Here are a few of the things we ensure our clients sites are optimized for:

PageSpeed

Is the time is takes to fully display the content on a specific page. This is even more important for mobile users since they are "on-the-go" and therefore have less time to wait for page to load than someone using a desktop/laptop who may be sitting at their desk or on their couch watching a show. Mobile users are looking for specific information, now, and will quickly abandon a search if a site doesn't load fast enough. A PageSpeed score by Google ranges from 0-100 points, the higher your score the better but anything above 85 is excellent. One important note here is that your PageSpeed score can change, so it's something you want to keep an eye at least month-to-month (hence the reporting stage of AdaptiveSEO).

No blocking of content

One of the elements Google's Mobile-Friendly Test will look at to determine how well optimized a site is for mobile is blocked content such as CSS, JavaScript or images. A mobile search spider wants to see everything that a user sees. This helps the search engines to determine if your site is in fact responsive or if you have a different mobile site altogether. Either way, leave this mobile SEO element to the professionals as adjustments to your CSS and JavaScript should only be handled by your IT department or a digital marketing professional.

Title tags and meta descriptions

These are part of any standard SEO checklist. However, when it comes to mobile you need to remember that you're working with less screen space, so these need to be as concise as possible while still providing meaningful information to the mobile user. For title tags you're looking at a 55 characters or less limit and for meta descriptions its 115 characters (at a maximum, if you can go shorter that do it). Also, make sure you don't take the easy way out and use duplicate tags and descriptions across multiple site pages (Google doesn't like this and it'll just negatively affect your ranking). Writing title tags and meta descriptions to be meaningful to the user and the page content is somewhat of an art, so again something you may want to leave to your digital marketing professional or agency.

NAP Consistency

One of the more recent developments in SEO has been an increased focus on the way your website is listed across the Internet on legitimate website directories. SEO professionals have noticed a direct correlation between the consistency of data about your business from one website to the next and your rankings for targeted phrases.

For instance, if your business is listed as "ABC Companies Inc." on Yelp and Angie's List, but listed as "ABC Inc." on Facebook and Yahoo, this creates duplicate or competing data and dilutes the authority of the website. This same type of data confusion can occur with:

- Business names (trade names vs. legal names)

- Addresses (old addresses, multiple locations, etc.)

- Phone numbers (local numbers, toll free numbers and website tracking numbers)

- Business categories

Given the importance of data consistency, SEO professionals focus on cleaning up and building what we call NAP consistency – names, addresses and phone number.

The process for doing this can be somewhat tedious. It involves reviewing listings at major website directories where your profile can be claimed, verified and updated. The process can take several months as some directories are manually reviewed and take time to process submissions.

Top 30 Difference-Making Factors in Competitive Markets

	1	Domain Authority of Website
	2	Consistency of Structured Citations
	3	Quality/Authority of Inbound Links to Domain
	4	Quality/Authority of Structured Citations
	5	Proper Category Associations

Source: Moz Local Ranking Factors 2014

Domain Profile Review

Historically, one of the major factors in SEO is the overall strength of the domain. By strength, we are referring to the number and quality of websites, blogs, social media portals and directories across the Internet which link back to your site.

Let's say for example that you have a competitor who has been interviewed by *Time Magazine* and has a link pointing to their website from Time.com. Obviously, *Time* is a very powerful website!

This type of link indicates that your competitor's site is a valid resource and may help search engines trust the content on that website more than yours, assuming you don't have the benefit of a link from *Time Magazine*.

Few SEO professionals dismiss the importance of having good links back to your site. The real issue is how do you ethically get more links?

In recent years, many websites were hit with penalties for building links in an unnatural fashion. Google's Penguin update has brought the focus back to natural ways of building the visibility of a website.

Tips for Developing A Natural, Safe Linking Strategy

Link Review

Conduct a review and cleanup of past links that may be holding your site back. Link removal can be difficult, but it's worth the time and effort if you have problem links in your profile.

Local Directory Listings

Claiming and verifying local profiles might be the #1 single piece of SEO advice we can give, especially for local business owners. Make sure to claim your free business listings on every major local site you can find, starting with the big ones like Google, Bing and Yahoo, as well as secondary sites like Yelp, Merchant Circle and other similar sites. As you go through the process, it's important to use a consistent set of data so that search engines find the same address, phone number and website. This consistency across directories can greatly improve local visibility, especially in local search rankings.

Reviews

While not technically an SEO strategy, reviews are fast becoming a critical piece of the search marketing puzzle. There are many powerful free sites which allow you to build customer reviews as well as paid sites which allow you to manage your reviews via dashboard. At minimum, you should focus on building reviews in places like Google+.

Social Profiles

Claim and validate your social profiles on sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. While we're not advocates of claiming hundreds of social profiles just for the sake of doing it, we recommend claiming the major social profiles so that you can at least claim your spot there, and make sure that the critical data (again phone numbers, website url, etc.) are all correct and up to date.

Website Directories

Certain niche and targeted paid website directories are still a viable strategy if you evaluate them by whether or not they can bring you good quality website traffic. For instance, if you are a manufacturer, there are quite a few high quality directories that charge annual fees for inclusion that might make sense to consider, as those directories offer powerful website links as well as highly qualified traffic.

Content Promotion and Link Outreach

Link outreach in the form of contacting other websites that you might potentially develop a partnership with to share content is always a good idea and has never gone out of style. If you

can locate sites that you can contribute content to or exchange information with that usually benefits both parties.

Now that your keyword research is done, your website is completely optimized and your link profile has been addressed, it's time to talk about long term content and social media strategies.

Optimized Content Marketing Plan

I will sum up what we've found to be the single most effective content strategy in two simple words: *quality wins*.

Simply put, creating high quality content is not only the best way to rank well with search engines, but it's also the most cost-effective way to turn website visitors into customers.

I'll take it a step further and say that if you put out low quality content, you're wasting your time and money. Nobody wants to read a generic 300 word article on how to get divorced, so why bother!?

In today's search results, you'll find articles and blog posts of 1,500 words or more with lots of images, illustrations or graphics and links to other resources which educate the reader on a given topic. Creating this type of high quality resource should be the goal no matter what type of content medium you decide to pursue.

Build a high quality content strategy:

Service Related Content and Blogging

What types of website content do you have planned for the year? Do you have enough content on your website that covers each of the products or services you offer? If not, consider adding pages as needed, then developing a blogging strategy to provide additional content about those products or services with the goal of adding value and solving problems.

Premium Content

In the last year or so, many site owners have turned to creating what we refer to as premium content that users might want to download in exchange for an email address, or possibly register for. This type of content usually takes the form of advanced reports, infographics, eBooks or even webinars. The type of premium content you produce will be specific to your business, but it can be a valuable addition to your website and very enticing to users who are looking for more detailed information about their problems or concerns.

Publish, Socialize and Share

Creating great content is only half the battle. Just because you publish it doesn't mean it'll get read. Once you write your content you'll have to do just as much PR and outreach work to amplify and extend your content as far as you can. In doing this you'll help to increase the social signals (re-tweets, likes, comments, reviews, +1s) associated with your content, which is ultimately

an indicator of how valuable your content is to your users and a reflection of you being an authority.

Whether search engines, like Google take your social signals into account when ranking your content is still a hot topic in the SEO world, but more and more it looks like this will be an element of consideration if not now, than in the future.

What we do know though is that by extending the reach of your content and building your content authority you are more likely to benefit from:

- Increased inbound links and citations due to people finding your content more

- Increased positive reviews due to people liking what you have to say

- Decreased bounce rate, higher time on site and more repeat visitors to your website since you've now become a source of valuable information

All of which are elements that can positively impact your SEO rankings and why activities around publishing, socializing and sharing your content is part of the WSI AdaptiveSEO™ methodology.

Measure

Reporting is the final piece of a good SEO strategy but it's by no means least important. You might argue that it's actually the most important, and that's why it's a key component of our WSI AdaptiveSEO™ methodology,

Reporting is also one of those areas that is often made more complicated than it needs to be. The amount of data that is available to digital marketers is simply overwhelming, so knowing how to sort through the data to stay focused on the key metrics is perhaps the most significant thing you can do.

A few tips we've learned about good reporting are:

Know Your KPIs (Key Performance Indicators)

Most well run businesses know what their KPIs are, and your digital marketing strategy is no different. Whether it's conversions, phone calls, eBook downloads or organic visits, have a small dashboard which keeps your KPIs at a glance organized by regular intervals.

Integrate Reporting As Much As Possible

If you can track all of your various KPIs in one place, you'll have an easier time evaluating overall performance. For instance, look for tools such as call tracking that integrate with other tools like Google Analytics. Having all of the data in one place is a huge time saver and helps you make better informed decisions about ROI.

Compare Apples to Apples

Each metric within a digital marketing report stands on its own merit. For instance, traffic from Google AdWords will perform much differently than organic traffic or traffic from referring

websites. It's important to compare metrics on their own for the purposes of drawing conclusions when it comes to reporting, and remember that you can't always compare data just because it's the same date range.

Don't Sweat Every Trend

This is probably the biggest pitfall of reporting and most common issue we encounter – the temptation to draw conclusions from short term trends in data. For instance, if your website traffic is down for the month, it's easy to conclude that perhaps your rankings dropped or something is wrong with your website. However, it's not always that simple. It could be something like seasonal interest, or just a slow overall month. My advice is to look at larger date ranges where you can see trends develop as short term data is not always trustworthy for decision making.

Conclusion: Three Pieces of Advice

I'd like to close with three pieces of advice that I offer to every business owner, manager or marketing partner I work with:

#1 - Oversight is Your Responsibility

Over the last few years we've seen more and more cases where website owners hired a consultant or agency to perform digital marketing services under the notion that these consultants could run things for them without proper supervision.

Yes, the digital marketing field can be complicated, but if your current consultant or agency cannot explain what they're doing and why, I suggest you look elsewhere. As a manager or business owner, it's your responsibility to oversee all of the activities going on with your website and social media platforms.

Don't give up the management of your website to someone else without fully understanding what they're doing and why!

#2 - There Are No Straight Lines in the Digital World

When it comes to digital marketing, rarely do you perform one task and directly see it correlate to something else. There are no straight lines.

For instance, you don't see your rankings get better just because you claimed or updated your local listings, or because you optimized your website.

The effect is cumulative.

Over time, you see your visibility improve as you tend to all of the fundamentals we outlined here and create high quality content. But rarely do you do one thing and directly see it result in something else.

I wish it were that simple and linear, but it's not.

#3 - If it Was Easy, Everyone Would Do It

A dear friend of mine once gave me this piece of wise advice: "Google is not just sitting around waiting for you to launch your website."

What he meant was that for any action you take – say optimizing your website or starting a blog - one of your competitors has already done it. Some maybe years before you even started thinking about it.

So don't expect to simply put up a blog or claim a few profiles and jump ahead of people who have invested significant time and money to build their digital presence. That's simply not how it works.

If you could build your own stunning website and attract thousands of customers, I'd start tomorrow.

If you could get to the top of search engines for just $39 a month, I would sign up now!

If a listing in the local yellow directory could save your business, I'd do it.

But frankly it's not that easy or everyone would be doing it.

About Blu Flamingo

Blu Flamingo I is a digital marketing company with a strong Pan African presence. Our Digital Marketing Consultants use their knowledge and expertise to make a difference for businesses all around the continent. Headquartered in South Africa, we also have offices in Kenya, Uganda Rwanda and Nigeria 5 countries. We're part of WSI- a powerful network of marketers who strive to discover, analyze, build and implement digital solutions that win digital marketing awards and help businesses succeed online.

Want to move ahead and discuss a project with a local Digital Marketing Consultant? Get in touch with one of our experts now by visiting www.bluflamingo.digital/contact