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SEO MYTHS

YOU SHOULD LEAVE BEHIND

→ IN 2014 ←



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FOREWORD

Over the last decade of SEO, we've seen remarkable change in how searchers perform queries and interact with results; in how engines crawl, index, and rank pages; and in how marketers effectively influence the engines to send them traffic. But, in spite of these monumental shifts, a shocking amount of misinformation about the practice of SEO persists. That's why I'm so glad to see HubSpot's Rebecca Churt addressing many of the myths that continue to bog down both aspiring and long-time practitioners.

It's possible that you've been contacted by SEO firms or SEO practitioners in the past who weren't fully above-board or that you've read articles in the blogosphere or the mainstream media (the latter is no less guilty than the former of spreading misinformation) that instilled some of these myths Rebecca will tackle as truths. But, after reviewing her work, I'm as confident as she is that what's presented here are wrongheaded ways of thinking that can damage your marketing efforts on the web alongside some solid advice in how to avoid it.

Please enjoy and apply, and best of luck in all your SEO efforts!

Rand Fishkin

Wizard of Moz

INTRODUCTION

To say SEO has “changed a lot” would be the understatement of the decade. Just take a look at how Google’s Panda and Penguin algorithm updates shook the world of SEO professionals -- marketers and SEO agencies worldwide halted their link-building and keyword-obsessed ways and swapped them for a long overdue focus on quality content.

But does that mean an SEO’s job is just to pump out high-quality, keyword-optimized content? Far from it. In fact, SEO has changed so much in the past several years that many marketers aren’t sure what’s outdated, what’s important, what will actually move the needle, and what’s simply wasted effort.

This guide is going to point out all of the most common myths and assumptions about how SEO works and debunk them for you, so you’re not wasting a single moment on things that simply don’t matter for SEO in 2014. Let’s get started.



MYTH
#1

I must submit my site to Google.

The idea that you need to submit your website to Google in order to appear in search results (or rank) is nonsense.

While a brand new site can submit its URL to Google directly, a search engine like Google can still find your site without you submitting it.

And remember, a submission does not guarantee anything. Crawlers will find your site and index it in due time, so don't worry about this idea of needing to "tell" Google about your site.



Not only do you not need to submit your site to Google, but you should really pay more attention to what you want to block from Google's crawlers via your robots.txt file. Certain directories and pages, such as internal search results, should usually be kept out of Google's search index so that your real content takes the lead.

Jeff Ferguson
CEO,
Fang Digital Marketing
@FangDigital



MYTH
#2

SEO is all about ranking.

While there's a strong correlation between search results placement and clickthrough rates, ranking is not the supreme end goal that it used to be.

Studies of clickthrough rates and user behavior have shown that searchers favor the top search results -- particularly the top-three listings. However, it's also been shown that on subsequent pages, being listed toward the top of the page shows similar click behavior. And with search results now being appended with rich text/snippets and author tags, results that appear below the top-three search results are getting much higher clickthrough rates.

Even before all of that was applied, rankings did not guarantee success. Theoretically, you could rank quite well for a term, get tons of traffic, and not make a dime from it. Is that what you really want? I don't think so.

Ranking for what? I'm sure we all remember those "Guaranteed to get you to #1 on Google!" ads. But they never said what for. Rather than obsessing about ranking, be useful -- then your readers will bring about more consumers because they'll share your stuff.

Alisa Meredith

Co-Owner,
Scalable Social Media
@alisammeredith



MYTH
#3

SEO is something I can hand off to IT.

There seems to be a perception that SEO requires some technical expertise, and since it is technical, IT can just do the work. While there is a technical component to SEO, it requires way more than just technical chops, so I'd think long and hard before handing an entire project to IT or a web designer.

Though you may need some of those individuals to assist you during the course of optimizing your website, it's far from ideal to just give SEO duties to IT and expect best practices to be adhered to.

While many IT professionals are adept in many technical areas -- for instance, making sure your website is crawlable and setting up redirects and XML sitemap files -- just remember that many IT personnel also work on things like setting up printers, which is ... well ... a different skill set than what's needed to effectively run an SEO strategy.

SEO is one of those acronyms that sounds like a flavor of rocket fuel -- something that belongs in the hands of technoids with html street cred. With every new iteration of Google algorithms though, we are learning that SEO should really stand for being Simply Excellent Online. In other words, create remarkable content first, THEN work with the IT folks to make sure that what reads well also scores well technically.

Paul Furiga

President & CEO,
WorldWrite Communications
@paulfuriga



MYTH
#4

More links are better than more content.

This is something that often comes along with the question, “Which should I invest in, link building or content generation?” Links are an important part of your website’s authority (even with the changing link landscape). However, if you have budget to invest in your website, I would say, “Hire someone to write for you.”

Too often, when businesses hire someone to do link building, they focus on the quantity of links rather than their quality -- but linking is not a numbers game anymore (far from it, actually). You should focus on having relevant and diverse sources that link to relevant pages.

When you invest in content, that content can be used for webpages, blog posts, lead generation offers, and guest posts on other sites -- all content types that will bring more links with them over time.

With the release of the Panda, Penguin, and Hummingbird algorithm updates, Google has done everything but slap us in the face to wake us up to the fact that SEOs can no longer game the system. While link-building done correctly is still valuable, creating extraordinary content has become non-negotiable.

Ron Medlin

CMO,
98toGo
@ronmedlin



MYTH
#5

Meta descriptions have a huge impact on search rankings.

Meta descriptions are HTML attributes that concisely explain the contents of webpages. You've seen them before on Google's search engine results pages (SERPs), where they're commonly used as preview snippets. So, it'd make sense that Google's algorithm would take these meta descriptions into account when determining search rankings ... right? Well, not so much.

Google announced back in 2009 that meta descriptions (and meta keywords) have no bearing on search rankings. That's not to say, however, that these descriptions aren't important for SEO. On the contrary: Meta descriptions present a major opportunity to separate yourself from the riff-raff and convince searchers that your page is worth navigating to.

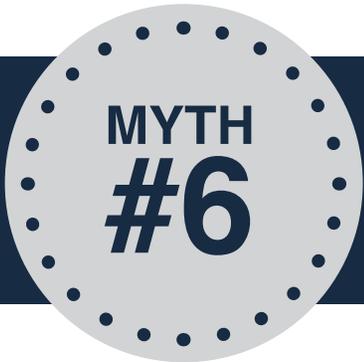
Having a relevant, compelling meta description can be the difference between a searcher who clicks through to your page and one who clicks elsewhere.

It's true, meta descriptions do not affect the placement your site has in search results. However, meta descriptions are still extremely important for engaging the user to click through to your page. I would recommend trying to use your targeted keyword once, not because it will help with ranking, but because it appears as bold if it matches a person's search. Try adding a mini call-to-action into your description too.

Luke Summerfield

Director of Inbound Marketing,
Savvy Panda
@SavvyPanda





Social media and SEO aren't related at all.

The intersection of SEO and social media is referred to as “social search.” Social search is very much a real thing -- an increasingly formal relationship between search and social has been evolving for years, and Google is working hard to prove this with Google+ and Author profiles.

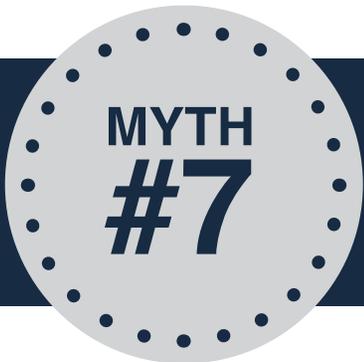
In social search, content is prioritized if it's connected to you in some way -- this could be through a Facebook friend, Twitter follower, or connection on any other major social network. Alternatively, some forms of social search prioritize content that has been shared by social media influencers, even if those experts aren't directly tied to you.

The lesson, folks, is to make sure you have a social media strategy and to think of it as part of your search optimization efforts -- the two should not be working as silos.



CUSTOMER CORNER

While Google Authorship doesn't directly increase your rank on search, it does make your search results stand out and can improve clickthrough rates by upwards of 150% in some cases. If you're using the HubSpot COS Blog, this functionality is built right in. On HubSpot, each blogger gets their own profile and can attach a Google+ account to it so that content you create is linked to your image.



On-page SEO is all I need to rank.

Putting keywords on a page isn't a magic bullet. Even with flawless on-page SEO, you've only tackled one part of the entire SEO equation.

Your SEO efforts should be a holistic composite that focuses on quality throughout on-page optimization, off-page optimization, user experience, and conversions.

So, be prepared to do more than just on-page SEO!



Years ago we felt the same way. But we've wized up and we now know that the most effective SEO strategies involve on-site and off-site components. Today, we combine our on-site efforts with a solid social distribution strategy, influencer marketing strategy and more!

Matthew Bivens

Lead Strategist &
Online Marketing Director,
98toGo
@marketingguyatl



MYTH
#8

Keywords need to be an exact match.

Keywords **do not** need to be repeated verbatim throughout a piece of content. In a headline, in particular, you want to use a keyword (or keywords) in a way that makes the most sense to your audience. The goal should be to write a stellar headline (somewhere between 4-9 words) that clearly explains what a piece of content is about.

Nothing is more of a buzzkill than having a headline that's awkwardly framed around one keyword phrase or, worse, that forcibly repeats a keyword phrase.

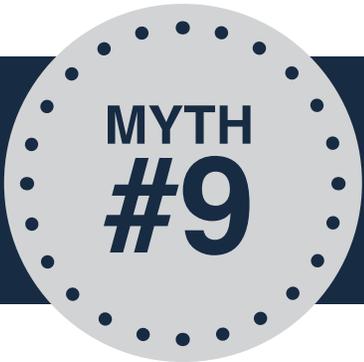
This rule applies not only to headlines, but also the content on the page: the goal should be to inform the reader, not to inform the search engines.

Don't waste your time trying to find the perfect couple of keywords to use on your site over and over. First of all, Google hates it when you over-optimize for machines. Secondly, searches will use a vast mix of words and phrases to find what they're looking for. The content on your site should be varied enough to meet that search criteria while still sticking to one overarching theme.

Sam Lowe

Marketing Assistant,
Weidert Group
@I_am_SamLowe





There's an ideal keyword density for my page.

The truth is there is no magic number for keyword density. This myth is like a pesky, little cockroach that keeps coming back to life, no matter how many times you swat it. So, for everyone who still clings to this one: **There is no ideal number of times that you should repeat a keyword on a page.**

Having said that, you should have your keyword(s) included in your page title -- how else will people know what your page is about? The keyword (or a variation of it) should also be included in a headline on the page, ideally in the URL, and at least once throughout the content.

Again, the goal is to make your content clear and meet the expectations of the searcher -- that's why they clicked through to your page, so don't assault them with over-optimized content.



CUSTOMER CORNER

If you're using HubSpot, the Page Performance report will give you everything you need to know about the search engine optimization of a given page. You'll get a diagnosis for each page, blog post, or landing page on your site, which will point out where you have major optimization issues or minor fixes that need to be made.

The Page Performance report will also show you how many keywords you've included in your page and how many other sites are linking back to your content. You can sort to see what type of content does best for SEO.



The H1 is the most important on-page element.

Think of the content structure on your webpage as an outline. It's a tiered approach to presenting information to users and search engines. What title tag your headline is wrapped in has little to no influence on your overall SEO -- that title tag (whether it's an H1, H2, H3, etc.) is only used for styling purposes.

The H1 is part of your CSS (custom style sheet) that a designer puts together to reference what font styling and size will be applied to a particular piece of content. This used to be more important, but search engines are smarter these days, and -- unfortunately -- people spammed this to death.

So, it really doesn't matter what header tag you use, as long as you present your most important concepts upfront and closer to the top of the page. Remember, you're optimizing your page for users first and foremost, which means that you want to tell them ASAP what your page is about through a clear headline.



If you're going through a library, you look at the book titles to find the best information for your needs. That is what the H1 -- along with meta descriptions and title tags -- do for readers and search engines. In order to bring in visitors, you need the search engine to identify your page as relevant, yet a formulaic title and content will seem disingenuous. Create titles that make sense to both entities, and, for heaven's sake, only use one H1 per page.

Grady Neff
Content Strategist,
Digital Relevance
@graydonski





My homepage needs a lot of content.

Have you ever come across a homepage littered with copy? Or, on the opposite spectrum, a homepage with barely any content at all? Think of your homepage as the gateway to your business. Visualize it! This is your chance to make a first impression and convey what you're all about. Maybe your value proposition is simplicity -- in that case, just a single login makes sense (especially if your name is Dropbox).

For most marketers, however, there is a need for a bit more content and context than that. Your homepage content should be long enough to clarify who you are, what you do, where you're located (if you're local), your value proposition, and what visitors should do next. These visitors should leave satisfied, not overwhelmed or underwhelmed -- and certainly not confused.



This is total nonsense. Your home-page is the H1 of your website. Make it about your customers. Communicate with them and tell your story. Why are they here and what can they find? Keep it simple and don't overthink the SEO. Keep it simple and drive home the message -- what value do you provide to the visitor?

John McTigue
EVP & Co-Owner,
Kuno Creative
@jmcTigue



MYTH
#12

The more pages I have, the better.

Logically, you would think that the larger the footprint of your website, the better you would do -- but it's simply not true.

First, not everything you publish gets indexed (and rightfully so). Second, sometimes, pages get indexed, but don't remain in the index. And third, just because you have pages indexed doesn't mean they will drive qualified traffic and leads.

Unfortunately, those who strive to have lots of pages on their website also tend to overlook the quality of that content -- and realistically, it's difficult to strive for both. The aim should be to publish what is most relevant. Have your content be at its best.



While the number of pages you have increases your chances of showing up for various searches, the rules of quality content on a properly built site with quality inbound links still apply.

Jeff Ferguson
CEO,
Fang Digital Marketing
@FangDigital



MYTH
#13

For local SEO, I only need to list my company's city, state, and/or country on my pages.

Alright, this is kind of a half-myth. You definitely need your city, state, and/or country on your pages if you're a geo-targeted business. However, if you're a U.S. business that's only targeting U.S. cities, for instance, you don't need "U.S." on your pages.

Search engines know where users are located, and they make an effort to more prominently show results that are specific to their location.

With that said, title tags, links, reviews, on-page citations, and social media (particularly Google+ Local) should all still clearly state where you are located and be included as part of your local SEO.

Consistent citations are so important for local SEO. Having one address on the web spelling out "Road" and the same address on another page on the web abbreviating to "Rd." signifies to the search engines two different addresses. We use a service called Yext to help achieve citation consistency across the web for ourselves and many of our clients.

Matthew Lee

Director of Marketing,
Adhere Creative
@AdhereCreative



MYTH
#14

Microsites and other domains I own that link or redirect back to my site will help my SEO.

The chances of this doing much for your SEO are slim to none. It's like having an election in which you vote for yourself a thousand times -- that still counts as one vote.

Search engines are smart enough to know who the registrants are for a domain and can see if it's the same person as your primary domain. (Note: If you are reading this and thinking, "Well, then I'll just change my registration information," you are clearly thinking like a spammer. Don't be that person!)

There is not much value in spreading your SEO thin, which is what you do by setting up domain after domain and optimizing each rather than putting all of that love into your primary domain. Why not just add the content to your primary domain or build a tool as an add-on to your website?



Microsites can have a valid reason for existence when they serve a specific marketing goal. As a link-building strategy, it's just not a viable long-term business strategy; it's churn & burn, something you do not want to do with your company site. Instead, focus on understanding your customers' needs and creating content that helps satisfy those needs.

David Demoe
Sr. Marketing Manger,
Search Engine People
@senginepeople



MYTH
#15

Google will never know if I have bad sites linking to me.

Yes, they will!

Just like Santa Claus knows if you've been good or bad.
Just like the Tooth Fairy knows when you've lost a tooth.
Just like your parents can sense when you've missed your curfew.

The point is Google knows (everything). Don't try to fool them -- especially post-Panda, -Penguin, and -Hummingbird, or you will be sent to your room (well, in this case, penalized).

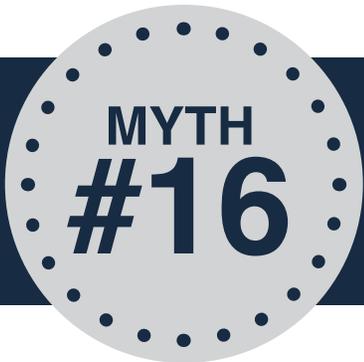


As people tried to take more shortcuts, the quality of search results became poorer and SEO developed reputation problems that it still needs to overcome. Remember that you can be penalized if you've been exchanging too many links with clients, as it can be seen as a manipulation attempt.

Jaymie Scotto Cutaia

CEO & Founder,
Jaymie Scotto & Associates
@jscotto





SEO is not a usability issue.

SEO has evolved from simply getting found to improving how users engage with your content. SEO is so much more than optimizing for search engines. You need to optimize for users first and foremost, so they actually click through your listing to your website and -- once they click through -- stay there.

To keep visitors on your site, ensure you're publishing content that's personalized and relevant. You should also make sure your website is intuitive and easy to browse (in other words, accessible by both crawlers and users).

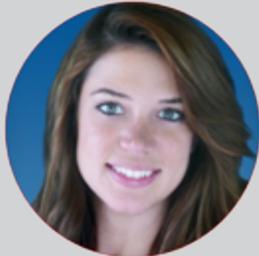
Also, don't make visitors look for what they need. Provide clear calls-to-action, and you'll convert those visitors into contacts, leads, and -- eventually -- customers.

"Search experience optimization" is what SEO should really stand for.



SEO is needed, that's a fact.
But don't optimize content for search engines only, it makes content hard to digest (because, clearly, I'm not a search engine). Speak Human.
Humans first, search engines second.

Kelly Kranz
Content Manager,
OverGo Studio
@OverGoStudio



MYTH
#17

SEO and inbound marketing don't mix.

Au contraire, inbound marketing and SEO are inexorably linked. If you think of the former as a giant wheel, you can think of the latter as a spoke on that wheel.

Inbound is a holistic philosophy that focuses on efficiently turning strangers into people who want to -- and should -- do business with you. This encompasses a wide array of tactics and best practices, including content creation, conversion optimization, and leveraging social channels, among other facets.

SEO, in comparison, is a specific marketing tactic that focuses on improving a business's visibility in -- and traffic from -- search engine results. Clearly, SEO can help you immensely with your inbound marketing. When we think about the four stages of the inbound methodology -- Attract, Convert, Close, and Delight -- SEO is especially relevant when it comes to that first stage: attracting the right people to your site.

I don't think about SEO. I think about search engines as one of many opportunities I have to reach customers. It's inbound because they find you based on searching for solutions to their problems. It's high-value because they are searching for solutions, not just browsing for fun. I think about integrating all facets of inbound to make it as easy as possible for customers to find us. Then I get to work creating the content and dialogue that's needed to solve their problems.

John McTigue

EVP & Co-Owner,
Kuno Creative
@jmtigue



CONCLUSION

Now that you know what the common SEO myths are, what are you doing that isn't moving the needle? Or worse, what are you doing that's making your SEO efforts worse? Understanding these SEO truths will make you both more effective and more efficient with your organic search strategy.

If you can take one thing away from this guide, it's this: More than anything else, SEO is about the overall experience for a searcher, and that experience starts the moment they enter a search query. The better their experience with you -- from your SERP listing, to the quality and relevancy of the content on your site, to the ease with which they can move through your site -- the better your SEO will be, too.



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