

19 SEO MYTHS



YOU SHOULD LEAVE BEHIND

FORWARD



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.

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 main-stream media (the latter is no less guilty than the former of spreading misinformation) that instilled some of these myths HubSpot will tackle as truths.

What's presented here are wrongheaded ways of thinking that can damage your marketing efforts on the web alongside some solid advice on how to avoid it.

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

RAND FISHKIN
WIZARD OF MOZ



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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 In fact, SEO has changed so much in the past several years that many marketers aren’t sure what’s outdated, what’s important, what will actually move the needle, and what’s simply wasted effort.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. Let’s get started.

STEPHANIE M^CLAUGHLIN
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MYTH #1

Setting up Google Authorship can increase my search visibility & clickthrough rates.

Bad news, friends: In June of 2014, Google removed Google Authorship photos from search engine results pages. While your name and byline would still appear, your beautiful headshot would not.

Then, in August of 2014, Google struck the final blow to Authorship and completely dismantled the program. All byline info disappeared from Google's search results, and marketers everywhere let out a collective, "What?!"

For the past few years we've been touting the importance of getting Google Authorship set up on your blog. But for the foreseeable future, you can forget about Authorship altogether: It no longer exists.

In an interesting turn of events, Google+ posts from your connections will now look like Authorship used to, so this change might be a clever ploy by Google to get more and more people to use Google+. Our best advice: don't panic. This change does not spell the end of SEO. This does not mean your site will suddenly tank in the rankings. It just means that you have to update your marketing activities to reflect the new reality.

MYTH #2

I must submit my site to Google.

The idea that you need to submit your website to Google or any search engine 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.

What's most important is knowing how to effectively use your robots.txt file in guiding Google and other major search engines on what content you do and do not want indexed. You must also follow best practices for how a robots.txt file is set up and executed. The rules are changing constantly. You now want certain CSS and Javascript files to be indexed. You also want to understand how to use Google Webmaster tools to keep your site clean and healthy and avoid penalties for duplicate content.

MYTH #3

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, quality content is the number one ranking factor in Google’s algorithm and with quality content comes earned links, which are the exact type of links you want.

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.

Google’s recent algorithm updates all work towards one goal: providing search results that answer questions, solve problems and relate better to the way we think. Google wants our websites designed for the human experience, to answer questions and provide solutions. Marketers who focus on creating remarkable content will earn quality links that will help in achieving better organic rankings.



MYTH #4

Having a secure (HTTPS encrypted) site isn't important for SEO.

Ever wonder why some website URLs start with “HTTP” and others start with “HTTPS”? The former is your standard “HyperText Transfer Protocol,” which facilitates communication over computer networks. The latter, “HTTP Secure,” provides the same functionality, only it has the benefit of an added layer of security called SSL/TLS.

In August of 2014, Google announced that it had started using HTTPS as a signal in their ranking algorithms, which means if your website still relies on standard HTTP, your rankings could suffer as a result.

For now, however, HTTPS remains a “lightweight” signal, affecting fewer than 1% of global queries (according to Google). So while it's clear that Google wants everyone to move over to the more secure HTTPS protocol, don't freak out if you haven't done it yet. There are more important factors that Google is looking at, such as the presence of high-quality content.

Google's reasoning behind the move towards more secure websites is sound. With all the websites being hacked and user information being compromised, keeping data safe needs to be a top priority. Google has put a strong emphasis on the visitor experience and ensuring their data is safe and their visit to your site is safe is now a priority and will only grow in importance as a ranking signal.

MYTH #5

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, 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.

Rankings at the top of Google have value, we all know that, but it's not the end all be all, and in fact, most of the top three positions in Google are "owned" and would take too much time and resources to uncede. What the focus needs to be is on obtaining the best rankings you can for the highest quality keyword phrases you can that will provide high quality traffic to your website that have the best chance at converting into a lead.

MYTH #6

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.

While meta descriptions may not affect where you fall in the search results, they are extremely important for engaging people to click on your search result. Make sure that language is dynamic and appealing. Plus, if you use the targeted keyword in the description, it will appear in bold type if it matches the user's search. The goal is to make the description compelling. Try placing a "hook" for the searcher at the end to draw them to your site.

MYTH #7

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 networks, which is ... well ... a different skill set than what's needed to effectively run an SEO strategy.

Today, doing SEO right requires a complex mixture of marketing, IT and web development – all working towards the same goals using the same strategy. If your departments exist in different silos, there inherently will be some disconnect on your SEO efforts. SEO is a marketing effort first and foremost and so overall ownership of SEO needs to start in marketing with a highly skilled individual or a diverse team.

MYTH #8

On-page SEO is all I need to rank.

Until search engines are able to enter our brains and read our thoughts, we'll always need to use written language in order to make search queries. We need to use keywords to communicate.

That being said, it's important to realize that Google is no longer trying to match the keywords you type into its search engine to the keywords of a web page. Instead, it's trying to understand the intent behind the keywords you type so it can match that intent to relevant, high-quality content.

The bottom line: search engines of the future aren't going to punish folks for underusing keywords or failing to have an expertly crafted, keyword-optimized page title ... but they will continue to punish folks for overusing keywords.

(FYI: On the next page, we'll offer some keyword best practices.)

This couldn't be further from the truth. Effective SEO has taken into account on-page and off-site elements, but it now also includes site and page load time, mobile responsiveness, a user's experience on the site and many other facets that all combine to provide the ranking position across a full spectrum of keywords.

MYTH #9

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.

If there's one theme that Google has worked towards in recent years, it's "optimize for human beings." Real people will use a variety of words and phrases to find what they're looking for. Your content should be written with that in mind, including different words, phrases and terminology. This way, you create a variety of content all organized around an overarching theme.

MYTH #10

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.

The H1 tag should dictate the predominant subject matter of the page. You could confuse your readers — and the search engines — about what the page is about, if you use more than one H1 per page. The relevance towards the content on the page and the overall subject matter far outweighs its usefulness at obtaining better positioning in the search engine results pages.

MYTH #11

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.

Your home page is the “hostess” for your website. It should welcome people to the party and tell them clearly where they can find what they’re looking for. At a dinner party (that we want to be invited to), the hostess would tell you where to put your coat, where the drinks are and when dinner will be served. Your home page should do the same. What are the important elements your visitors need to know right away? Why should they stay and why should they try the hors d’oeuvres?

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 rank — 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.

More isn't always better, especially when more pages are more for the sake of more, versus more because it's strategic and targeted towards certain visitors, personas, industries or challenges. High quality content on a properly-built site with good inbound links will win every time.

MYTH #13

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

This myth couldn't be further from the truth. If you're a local business, optimizing for local search won't only help you get found, but it will help you get found by people who are nearby and more likely to buy from you.

Looking forward, Google will continue to take steps to bubble the best local content to the surface of search results. Need some proof? In July of 2014, Google took a major step in this direction with the release of its new Pigeon algorithm. The algorithm treats local search rankings more like traditional search rankings, taking hundreds of ranking signals into account. Pigeon also improved the way Google evaluates distance when determining rankings.

The bottom line: local SEO matters, probably more so now than ever before.

Consistency is key with local SEO. Search engines, especially Google, pay close attention to what your message is across the entire website. Staying consistent with the particulars of address and local search triggers can make the difference between ranking above or below your competition.

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 be valuable when they serve a specific purpose. Building microsites if they're going to drive specific campaigns around products or services for a long period of time can have value. If you don't have a specific goal for a microsite, then focus on creating content on your main site that meets your visitor's needs or answers their questions – without leaving your site. Microsites will not provide SEO value for your main website.

MYTH #15

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

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).

We've seen organizations devastated when they paid for links. Those links were bad, and the results were worse. They lost all their strong organic rankings and were even denied the ability to use AdWords for a period of 3 months. This crushed them and the company went out of business. Don't pay for links, ever, period.

MYTH #16

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.

If you're doing SEO correctly, then you're optimizing for both visitors (human beings) and search engines (machines), but always with a visitor's first mentality. A visitor's experience on your site is more important and will aid in determining how you rank. A bad experience tells Google to lower your ranking, and vice versa. Make people want to stay and revisit your site with quality, fresh content.

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.

Search engines provide one of many channels to reach customers and prospects. (Others: email, social, paid media, etc.) Considering there are over 3.5 billion searches per day on Google alone, it's one of the best ways to be found. If people have problems that they're searching for solutions to, then they're motivated — and your content could be a godsend. That's a great way to start a relationship, huh?

MYTH #18

I can hire someone to “do SEO”

Whether you intend to hire someone in-house or use a consultant or agency, don't let anyone tell you they can “do SEO” for you. While this may have been true in the (long distant) past, the algorithms have evolved to the point where SEO is a result of your collected actions online, not a tactic that can be employed. SEO today is a combination of architectural and responsiveness elements, on-page and off-page elements, inbound links, your blog and your downloadable content.

*In all reality, SEO has little to do with “Search Engine Optimization” these days. Instead, the acronym should really stand for “Sustained Excellence Online.”
The result you achieve when all the elements work in concert to better your commitment to your site visitors and the search engines.*

MYTH #19

SEO Doesn't Matter for Mobile

Late to the party, but only a bit, Google released its newest ranking signal for mobile searches; the experience or mobile “friendliness” of a website, on April 21, 2015. What this means is that Google is now taking into account if a website is designed specifically for a mobile audience either through a responsive framework or specific m. site.

Sites will now drop in rankings if they do not have a mobile-friendly website. This is huge – as many as 40% of the Fortune 100 companies were immediately penalized on mobile searches for not having a mobile-friendly site. This also means that the playing field is now level for those companies that want to get a foothold on mobile rankings before the competition.

Sites that decide to go responsive will now see great value in optimizing for mobile. The mobile audience is increasing each year and now equals desktop usage. According to comScore, the number of mobile users is over 2 billion and growing fast. Additionally, over 48% of mobile users start their search on a search engine. These are compelling statistics and should help everyone realize that mobile is the future and that their websites need to be ready.

No longer are we able to control how people find us or want to evaluate us. We must be prepared and adapt to the new consumer. The educated consumer that researches and knows far more about your products and services than you think before they even make contact with you. This is only the beginning, wearable tech, smart TV's, game consoles, etc. There is more to come and taking a proactive approach sure beats missing the boat.

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.



ABOUT US

Savoir Faire is an integrated marketing firm that sits at the crossroads of traditional and digital marketing, with an adventurous spirit when it comes to evolving disciplines. We are a collection of talented, curious, and dynamic individuals who all share a passion for bringing a brand story to life and getting it the results it deserves.

If you have questions about SEO, Inbound marketing or other digital strategies, don't hesitate to contact Savoir Faire at (617) 899-2856 or by email: stephanie@savoirfaire-us.com



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