

6 SEO trends to get ready for

Insights from the inside: key takeaways from SMX West 2016



For the SEO PowerSuite team, this year's Search Marketing Expo in San Jose was a delight in all possible ways. First, we got to meet dozens of our users in person. Second, we heard a massive amount of good things about SEO PowerSuite from speakers who mentioned us in workshops and presentations. And last but not the least, we probably learnt more about what's hot and coming in SEO than we have throughout the entire past year.

There's a tickling time-travel feeling to events like SMX. Being able to learn about SEO trends and changes long before the media at large catch up is just as strange as it is exciting. Still a bit light-headed from all the surprising SEO knowledge, I can tell you one thing for sure: the 'future' of search is already happening. Here's what it looks like in my 6 major takeaways from SMX.

Contents

- 1 Using keyword research for consumer intelligence
- 2 Voice search and the staggeringly near future of SEO
- 3 The AI revolution: how RankBrain is shaking up the SERPs
- 4 AMP is Google's next big thing (here's why you should care)
- 5 The backlinks of the future are... linkless?
- 6 Google confirms using click data to rank pages (in one way at least)

Using keyword research for consumer intelligence

We've heard a lot about keyword research and its importance for on-page SEO. But have you thought about keyword research being the most trustworthy source of consumer and market insights?


Interestingly, 'most' is the key word here. Whatever happened to the good old customer surveys? Isn't asking your customers what they need the best, easiest, and most effective way to get honest answers?

Well... According to Tony Verre from DreamFire, their answers are only honest half of the time — at best.



Tony Verre [@TonyVerre](#)

Founder, DreamFire Digital Marketing

"50 to 84% of consumers don't provide honest responses about their behaviors in marketing surveys." 

This can be hard to believe, but Tony quotes some amazing examples of how big brands went through equally big losses when they invested in marketing strategies based on customer feedback:

- Walmart decluttered its shelves based on consumer surveys, losing \$1.85 billion in revenue.
- McDonald's spent \$300 million to create an "adult burger" in response to consumer feedback, which they eventually discontinued and labeled a failure.

There's a bunch of reasons why consumers aren't always completely honest in surveys. First, they might want to sound superior to the guy or girl next to them. Or, on the contrary, be trying to fit into the social norm. They could be too polite to tell you your idea, product, or service sucks. Quite often, they aren't even being dishonest on purpose; sometimes it's hard to give a truthful answer when asked about something upfront — because you've never really given the subject much thought.

So if we can't trust consumers, who can we trust? Surprise surprise: **search engines!** The queries people type into search bars are the best — and extremely honest — examples of what they really want.

The great part is, there's a bunch of keyword tools available to give you all that information (Tony's top 3 are Keyword Planner, Google Related Searches, and Google Trends); all you need to do is group and interpret it right. The greatest part? You're probably doing keyword research for SEO anyway — so you can get actionable insights with barely any extra effort.

But before we move on to the how, let's make things clear with the what. What are those 'actionable insights', exactly?

First, they are answers to the most burning questions for every marketer and entrepreneur.

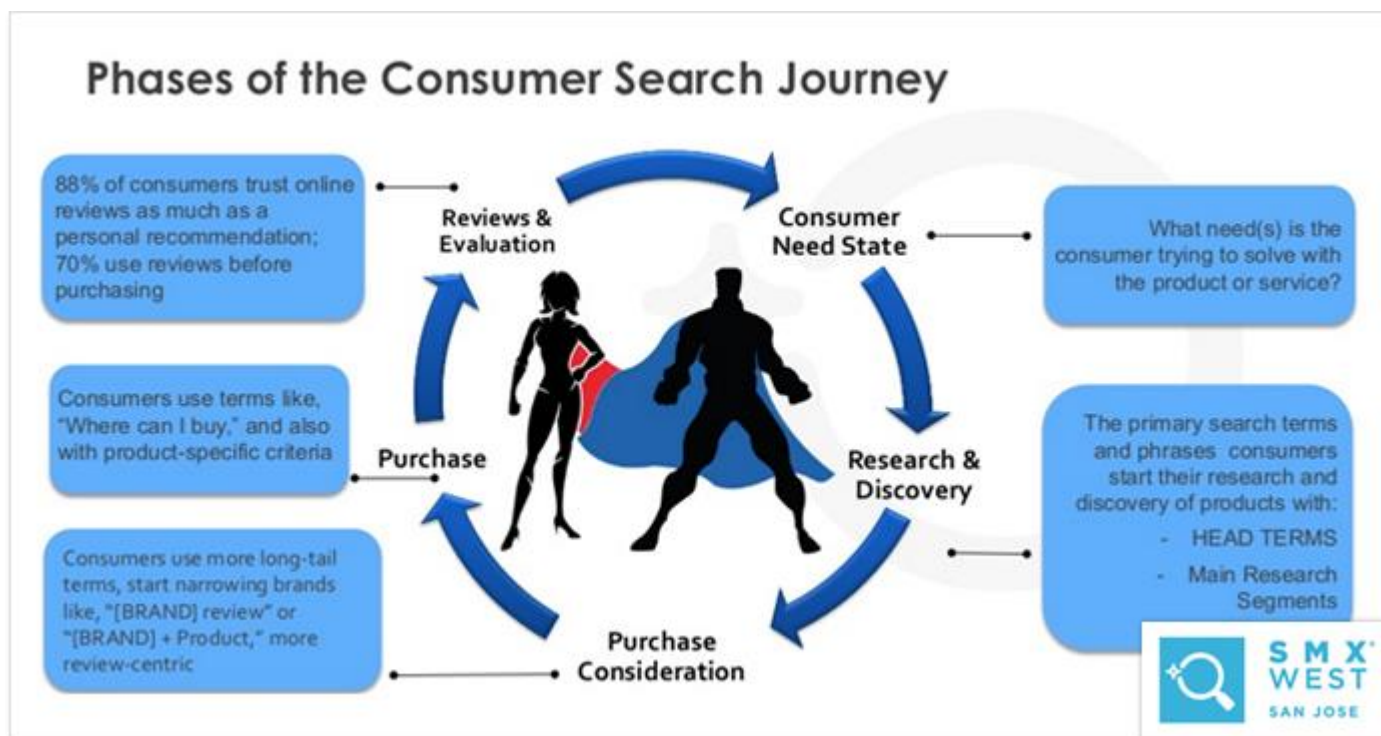
What problems are people facing in your industry?

What needs are they solving with products like yours?

What bothers them most about your competitors?

What, on the contrary, do they like?

Second, they are the phases in the consumer journey that your customers go through. Being aware of those will let you make sure you meet your customers' needs at each stage, and guide them smoothly on to the next one.



The result? You end up with both an on-page strategy *and* a holistic marketing strategy, built on the data you can trust.

Actionable tip

You can always do the research manually — but who wants that when there are free tools to save you time? :) You can complete the entire research workflow described by Tony with [SEO PowerSuite](#)'s Rank Tracker. Rank Tracker lets you get keywords from 20 keyword tools, including Tony's favorites:

- **Google AdWords Keyword Planner**

- **Google Trends**
- **Google/Bing Related Searches**
- Google/Bing/Yahoo Autocomplete
- Competitors' pages
- Google Search Console & Analytics
- SEMRush
- Keyword discovery

OK, I might want to stop here, but there are 20 keyword tools integrated into Rank Tracker in total. To start your keyword research, launch Rank Tracker, go to the *Keyword Research* module, and click *Suggest Keywords*. Pick any method you'd like to use (you can repeat the search for as many keyword tools as you like) and give the app a second to dig out the terms. The keywords you get will be readily grouped by topic to make organizing and navigating through them easier. You can sort keywords and groups by search volume to pick the most frequently used ones, and mark the terms that belong to one phase in the consumer journey with tags or color markers.

The screenshot shows the Rank Tracker interface with the following data:

| # | Keyword | # of Searches | Competition | KEI | Expected Visits | Landing Page | Tags |
|----|---------------------|---------------|-------------|-------|-----------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1 | top ten singers | 880 | Low | 0.762 | 336 | | Google A... |
| 2 | top pop singers | 880 | Low | 0.792 | 336 | | Google A... |
| 3 | top 10 pop singers | 480 | Low | 0.432 | 184 | | Google A... |
| 4 | top ten artists | 390 | Low | 0.351 | 149 | | Google A... |
| 5 | top pop artist | 260 | Low | 0.234 | 99 | | Google A... |
| 6 | top 20 singers | 210 | Low | 0.189 | 80 | | Google A... |
| 7 | artist singers | 170 | Low | 0.153 | 65 | | Google A... |
| 8 | top 5 singers | 170 | Low | 0.153 | 65 | | Google A... |
| 9 | top ten artist | 140 | Low | 0.126 | 54 | | Google A... |
| 10 | top ten pop singers | 140 | Low | 0.126 | 54 | | Google A... |
| 11 | artists singers | 110 | Low | 0.099 | 42 | | Google A... |
| 12 | top ten pop artists | 90 | Low | 0.081 | 34 | | Google A... |
| 13 | 10 top singers | 40 | Low | 0.036 | 15 | | Google A... |
| 14 | top 20 pop singers | 30 | Low | 0.027 | 11 | | Google A... |
| 15 | top 50 pop artists | 30 | Low | 0.027 | 11 | | Google A... |
| 16 | top 50 pop singers | 20 | Low | 0.018 | 8 | | Google A... |
| 17 | top 3 artists | 20 | Low | 0.018 | 8 | | Google A... |

Oh, and you can do all of it in Rank Tracker's free-forever version. But if you had to export your data, you'd need a Professional or Enterprise license.

[Download SEO PowerSuite](#)

Voice search and the staggeringly near future of SEO

Google talks a lot about its increasing focus on mobile. We know that in 2015, people conducted more searches on phones and tablets than on desktop. But what exactly does it mean for SEOs? In the long run, it's much more than going mobile-friendly.

Here's one thing you may not have thought about yet: in the mobile world, people increasingly use speech. Google reports that **55% of teens and 40% of adults use voice search every day** on the Google app. And it's only logical that the amount of voice search is growing so fast. The concept may seem a little sci-fi-ish at first, but if you think about it, there's not one reason why search *shouldn't* be shifting away from typing. Voice search is quicker, it's hands-free, and most importantly, it's working extremely well: the current speech recognition word error rate is 8 percent, and it's going down steadily.



Behshad Behzadi [@GoogleZurich](#)
Principal Engineer, Google Zurich

"The ratio of voice search is growing faster than type search." 

From the SEO standpoint, how is voice search different from typing? First, we must acknowledge that people don't search the same way with their keyboards as they do with their vocal chords. Voice search is conversational search where people use more natural sentences instead of the odd-sounding query language:

"weather paris" -> "What's the weather like in Paris?"

For SEOs, that means semantic context and conversational search is getting even bigger than before. We've been bidding farewell to short-tail keywords on over-optimized pages since the launch of Hummingbird in 2013, but voice search clearly makes exact-match keywords a thing of the past for good.

Second, it's crucial to understand that a person using voice search has different intentions. Typically, they're looking to get quick answers to their questions or fulfill an immediate need.

This means you'll need to think about the questions your customers may have, and figure out quick, mobile-friendly ways to give them the answers.

Actionable tip

With the growing share of voice queries in search, you need to optimize for context, topics, and conversational keywords, and offer quick answers to fulfill the searchers' immediate needs:

- When you do keyword research, put even more focus on long tails, questions, and conversational queries.

- Consider adding pages (or editing some of the ones you already have) that can give searchers quick information. Think about what questions your customers or audience are asking, and address those on your blog, FAQ pages, and social media posts.

You can find commonly searched-for questions with the keyword research module I already mentioned in [SEO PowerSuite's Rank Tracker](#). Simply launch Rank Tracker (free version is just fine), go to the *Keyword Research* section in the left-hand menu, and press the *Suggest keywords* button. Pick the *Google Autocomplete* method from the list, and type in keywords with wildcards. If, say, you're running an SEO blog, these could be some good terms to enter:

Why * SEO

How * Google

What * search engines

Give Rank Tracker a moment to complete the search, and you'll end up with hundreds of questions you can potentially target along with each term's search volume to let you pick the most commonly asked ones.

Step 4: Choose Keywords To Check Rankings

Please select the keywords you need by enabling a checkbox next to a respective keyword. When done, click "Next" to check your rankings for these keywords in your preferred search engines right now, or click "Finish" to just add them to your project without checking.

Select All Select None

| # | Selected | Keyword | # of Searc... | Competition | KEI | Expecte... | Cost Per... |
|----|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|-------------|--|------------|-------------|
| 13 | <input type="checkbox"/> | why does google know everything | 90 | 300,000... | 0.000 ■ | 44 | 0.00 |
| 14 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | how to improve seo ranking | 90 | 594,000 | 0.014 ■ | 44 | 10.92 |
| 15 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | how to seo wordpress | 90 | 31,300,... | 0.000 ■ | 44 | 0.00 |
| 16 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | how to do seo yourself | 90 | 19,000,... | 0.000 ■ | 44 | 5.78 |
| 17 | <input type="checkbox"/> | why use google chrome | 90 | 17,100,... | 0.000 ■ | 44 | 0.00 |
| 18 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | how to seo your website | 70 | 30,300,... | 0.000 ■ | 34 | 6.72 |
| 19 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | google en españa | 70 | 110,000... | 0.000 ■ | 34 | 0.00 |
| 20 | <input type="checkbox"/> | why google is the best | 70 | 872,000... | 0.000 ■ | 34 | 0.00 |
| 21 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | how to do seo marketing | 70 | 71,200,... | 0.000 ■ | 34 | 9.18 |
| 22 | <input type="checkbox"/> | why use google | 70 | 689,000... | 0.000 ■ | 34 | 0.00 |

572 of 577 keyword(s) selected

Add tags: Google Autocomplete on 2016-03-21 ✕

Press the "Enter" key to save the current tag and proceed to adding another one.
Use the Left/Right keyboard buttons to scroll through the list of your tags.

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The AI revolution: how RankBrain is shaking up the SERPs

Google's known for its persistent thrive to provide the searchers with the best search results possible, and RankBrain is one of the new things that helps them achieve that. RankBrain is a machine learning system that analyzes search results and picks the most relevant ones to display at the top of the SERP based on the data from past searchers. Google did mention that RankBrain is the [third most important factor](#) in its ranking algorithm.

SEOs believe that to figure out relevance, RankBrain looks at all kinds of contextual features on pages that come up for any given query. Then, it gives every result a relevance score based on the presence of absence of those features.

It's important to understand that those features are different for each keyword, so there's no universal list of things to add to your pages to make RankBrain fall in love with your site. But one thing you can do is look at the pages of your best ranking competitors and try to figure out the common characteristics that make up their relevance score.

Such features can be literally anything on the page that can have a positive effect on user experience. To give you an example, Marcus Tober and the Searchmetrics team found that for ecommerce and health, pages with **more content** and **more interactive elements** are more successful.

To see how RankBrain has already impacted search results, Eric Enge and his colleagues at Stone Temple Consulting analyzed 163 queries from their database of cached Google SERPs. All of the 163 queries met the following criteria:

1. The search results shown indicated that Google didn't understand the query;
2. There is a reasonable set of results that Google should be able to find for the query.

Then, they compared the cached results from July 2015 (before RankBrain) to the ones Google currently provides for these queries, and found something pretty staggering: **54.6% of the results have improved.**

Here's an interesting example from Stone Temple's study: only half a year ago, Google provided some pretty confusing results for a keyphrase that, to a human, seems pretty straightforward. Now, they are doing a much better job:

The image shows a side-by-side comparison of Google search results for the query "why are pdfs so weak".

Left Panel (July 2015 Answer): The search results are cluttered and confusing. The top result is from RAND Corporation, but the snippet is garbled: "Why the Iraqi Resistance to the Coalition Invasion Was S...". Below it, another result from the same source is shown with a similar garbled snippet. A third result is from "litenbooks.org" with a snippet: "Why the Iraqi Resistance to the Coalition Invasion Was S...". A fourth result is from "ftrst.org" with a snippet: "The Puzzle of...". A large brown box with white text "July 2015 Answer" is overlaid on the bottom half of the results.

Right Panel (January 2016 Answer): The search results are much clearer and more relevant. The top result is from Stack Exchange, with a clear snippet: "What security scheme is used by PDF password encryption ...". Below it, the same RAND Corporation result is shown, but the snippet is now legible: "Why the Iraqi Resistance to the Coalition Invasion Was S...". A large brown box with white text "January 2016 Answer" is overlaid on the bottom half of the results.


The comparison highlights the improvement in search result quality and relevance over time, specifically for the query "why are pdfs so weak".

Eric does admit that not all of the improvements they saw may have been due to RankBrain, but he strongly believes that a lot of the changes were RankBrain-related.



Eric Enge [@stonetemple](#)

CEO, Stone Temple Consulting

"RankBrain will do a better job of matching user queries with web pages, so you'd be less dependent on having all the words from the query on your page." 

Actionable tip

Relevance is crucial for good rankings, and RankBrain is perhaps Google's best way of detecting relevance to date. When optimizing for your keywords, it's more important than ever to think about user intent and fulfilling the need behind the query — even if that does not imply using the exact keywords in your page's copy.

You can get a good idea of relevance features that may be used as signals by RankBrain if you analyze the pages of your competitors who currently rank in Google's top for your set of keywords. To get a list of your major competitors, open [SEO PowerSuite](#)'s Rank Tracker, go to *Preferences -> Competitors*, click *Suggest*, and enter your keywords (you can and should make the list long, but make sure you only enter the terms that belong to the same topic at a time). Rank Tracker will look up all the terms you entered and come up with 30 sites that rank in top 30 most often. You can then choose up to 10 of those to add to your project, examine their pages in the browser, and look for relevance features you may want to incorporate on your site.

Step 4: Choose Competitors To Add To The Project

Here is a list of competitors built for Bing US search engine - based on 53 keywords you've specified. Please select the competitors you'd like to add to your project and press Finish.

| # | Select... | Competitor | Visibility | Keywords in top 1 | Keywords in top 10 | Keywords in top 30 |
|----|-------------------------------------|---|------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | http://www.billboard.com | 71% | 17 (32%) | 37 (70%) | 45 (85%) |
| 2 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | http://www.mtv.com | 54% | 4 (8%) | 30 (57%) | 34 (64%) |
| 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | https://en.wikipedia.org | 53% | 2 (4%) | 23 (43%) | 44 (83%) |
| 4 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | http://www.artistdirect.com | 44% | 4 (8%) | 23 (43%) | 32 (60%) |
| 5 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | http://www.thetoptens.com | 44% | 7 (13%) | 24 (45%) | 30 (57%) |
| 6 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | http://www.youtube.com | 30% | 0 (0%) | 10 (19%) | 26 (49%) |
| 7 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | http://www.rollingstone.com | 28% | 0 (0%) | 10 (19%) | 26 (49%) |
| 8 | <input type="checkbox"/> | http://www.metrolyrics.com | 26% | 1 (2%) | 13 (25%) | 17 (32%) |
| 9 | <input type="checkbox"/> | http://top40.about.com | 25% | 0 (0%) | 13 (25%) | 22 (42%) |
| 10 | <input type="checkbox"/> | http://www.ranker.com | 22% | 0 (0%) | 6 (11%) | 22 (42%) |
| 11 | <input type="checkbox"/> | http://www.songlyrics.com | 18% | 0 (0%) | 10 (19%) | 15 (28%) |
| 12 | <input type="checkbox"/> | http://www.allmusic.com | 15% | 0 (0%) | 5 (9%) | 17 (32%) |
| 13 | <input type="checkbox"/> | http://artists.letsingit.com | 14% | 0 (0%) | 5 (9%) | 12 (23%) |
| 14 | <input type="checkbox"/> | http://www.letsingit.com | 14% | 0 (0%) | 8 (15%) | 9 (17%) |

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AMP is Google's next big thing (here's why you should care)

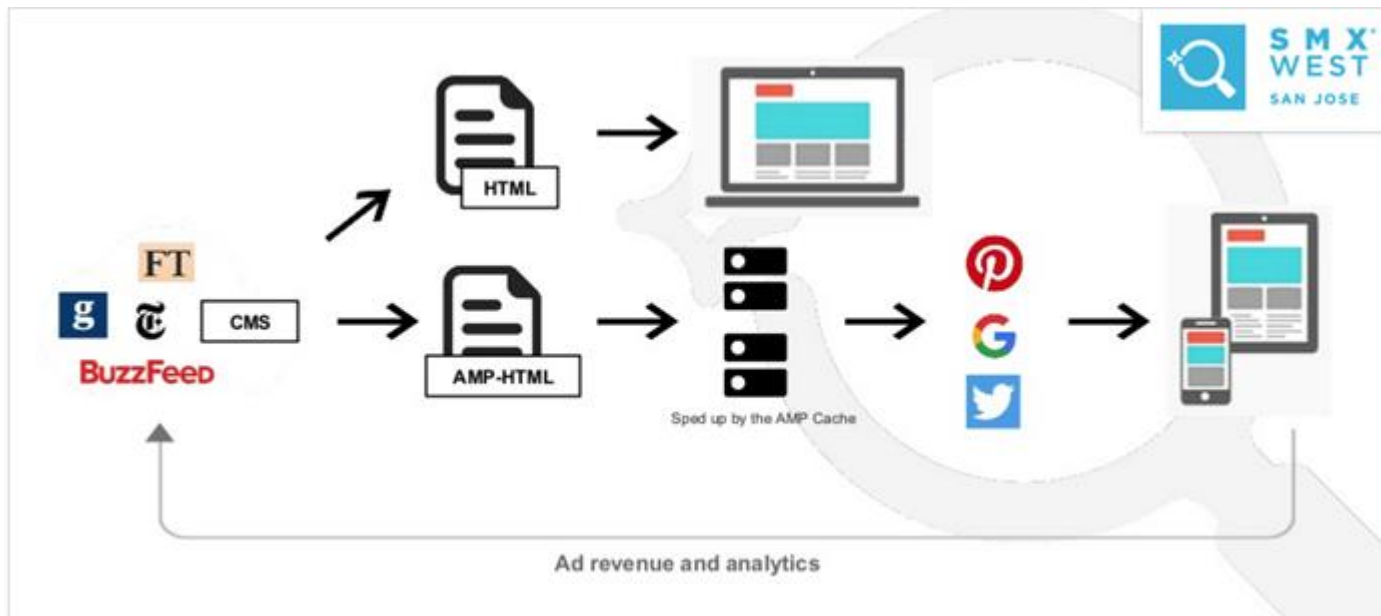
[AMP](#) (short for Accelerated Mobile Pages) is an open source project by Google that helps webmasters create lightning-fast mobile web pages. AMP includes three parts: AMP HTML (regular HTML with some restrictions and extensions), AMP JS (a library that ensures the fast rendering of AMP pages), and AMP Cache (Google's cloud cache intended to reduce the time it takes for content to load on a user's mobile device).

Google officially launched AMP into the search results this February for some queries, but we expect it to affect more searches soon.

With AMP, Google is looking to solve 2 major problems:

1. The poor user experience on mobile due to slow loading pages.
2. The increasing use of adblockers on mobile devices.

Google believes that more and more mobile users opt for adblockers due to the fact that pages with ads load slower. Subsequently, publishers, advertisers, and Google itself aren't getting the same revenue from ads they used to.



Initially, webmasters were skeptical about AMP as it seemed too restrictive to achieve most websites' purposes. The biggest concern was that JavaScript basically wasn't allowed at all. However, now AMP has what Paul Shapiro from Catalyst calls a "magic extended component", *amp-iframe*, that lets you do awesome things with your accelerated pages:

- Web forms, for lead generation or other purposes,
- Third-party JavaScript,
- Embedded comment systems,
- Some unsupported ad formats,
- Videos via players not supported by AMP,
- Interactive visualizations/charts (Google Maps, etc.),
- Pop-ups.

But the main question is still the same: **who is AMP right for?** Currently, AMP results are only displayed in Google for publishers and news sites. But according to Googler Dave Besbris, it's "an important time to get your feet wet" for all other industries as well.



Dave Besbris [@tweetbez](#)

Vice President of Engineering, Google

"We are going to be rolling out AMP elsewhere, including in search."

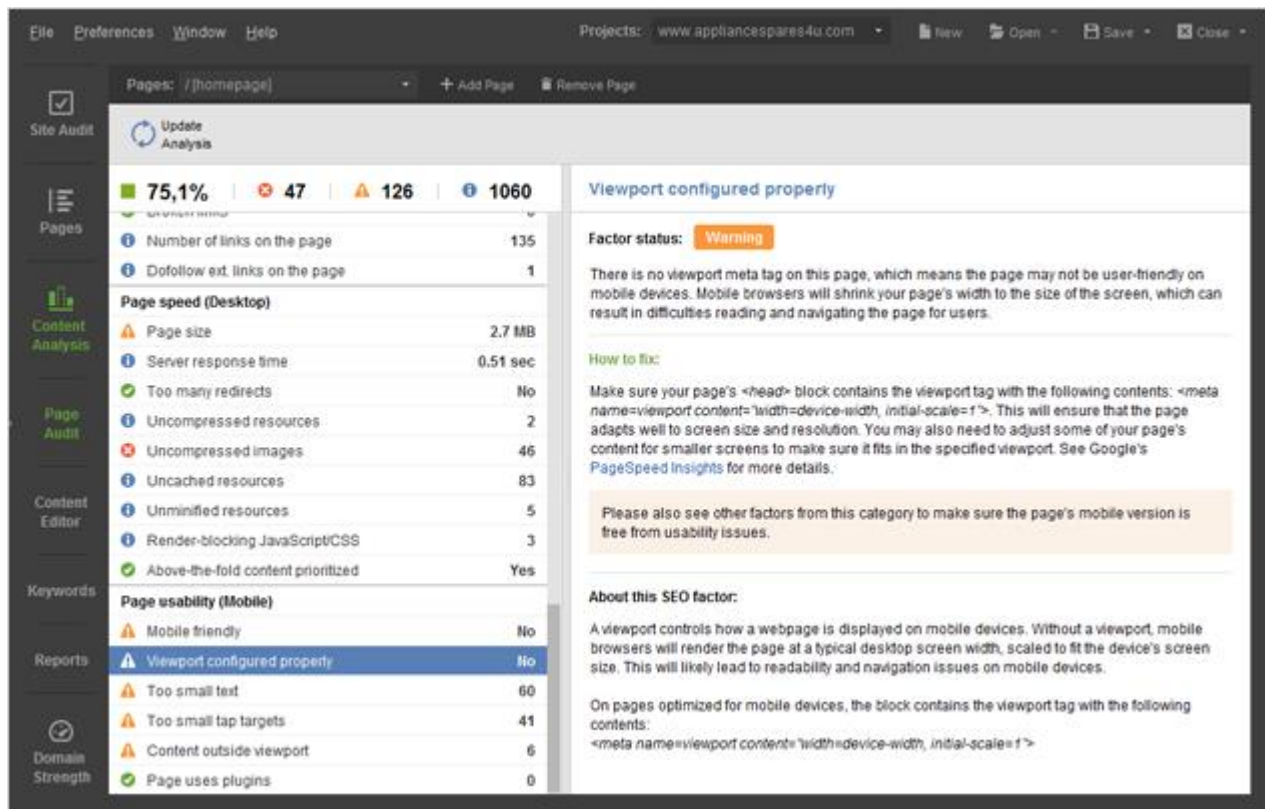


Actionable tip

For non-publishers, going AMP is a matter of choice. Before you make your decision, it's important to understand whether or not there are speed issues on the mobile versions of your

pages. If you detect some problems — and if those are numerous and require a lot of your time and effort — you may consider AMP as an alternative to fixing the issues.

You can run a comprehensive mobile-friendliness test in [SEO PowerSuite's](#) WebSite Auditor under *Content Analysis*. Just select the page you're looking into, click *Update Factors*, and look at the *Page Usability (Mobile)* section of the technical factors for any errors or warnings.



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The backlinks of the future are... linkless?

For years, links have been the top ranking signal that SEOs tried hardest to optimize (and quite often, manipulate). But times are changing, and search engines are getting smarter.

Today, search engines have already figured out a better way to understand what to trust. In fact, the top important ranking signal has already evolved way beyond the technical definition of a 'link'. You're in for a surprise: **linkless mentions** can be just as important.

Duane Forrester, formerly Sr. Product Manager at Bing, points out that unlinked mentions can be just as strong a signal as regular links, confirming that search engines can easily identify mentions, associate them with brands and products, and use those as a signal in determining a site's quality and authority.



Duane Forrester [@DuaneForrester](#)

Vice President of Organic Search Operations, Bruce Clay

"Years ago, Bing figured out context and sentiment of tone, and how to associate mentions without a link. As the volume grows and trustworthiness of this mention is known, you'll get a bump in rankings as a trial." 

Of course, links continue to be just as important as they've always been. What has changed is that now, along with links, you absolutely need to gain reviews and other positive mentions. You may have already been doing this for reputation management and brand awareness; now you have every reason to do it for SEO, too.

Actionable tip

In addition to a backlink checker, you'll now need a monitoring tool that will find mentions of your brand and product across the Web. Mind that a lot of apps only look for mentions on social media, so make sure the one you choose is good at digging up mentions that come from the regular web resources, too (like review platforms, forums, and industry blogs). [AWARIO](#) is *really* good at this (they have a free trial, too). If you have an SEO PowerSuite license, you can also get AWARIO at half its regular price for 6 month.

Make sure you watch and promptly reply to any negative comments about your brand to stop them from spreading further, and follow up on positive ones. If there are little or no mentions about your brand, it's a good idea to start offering perks and bonuses to your customers in exchange for reviews or blog posts, or begin partnerships with influencers in your niche.

Google confirms using click data to rank pages (in one way at least)


The debate on whether or not Google uses user behavior factors in its ranking algorithm has been on for ages, and at SMX, Google's ranking engineer Paul Haahr finally shed some light on the issue.

According to Paul, Google uses a bunch of "metrics" to evaluate and rank search results. Those metrics can come from human quality ratings and, more importantly, live experiments. Thousands of such experiments are run for Google searchers in real time, at any given second.



Paul Haahr [@haahr](#)

Ranking Engineer, Google

"When you run a search on Google, you're in at least one experiment." 

How do those tests work? Google swaps search results returned in response to queries and then looks at how the change affects the click-through rates of those results.

Live Experiments



- A/B experiments on real traffic
 - Similar to what many other websites do
- Look for changes in click patterns
 - Harder to understand than you might expect
- A lot of traffic is in one experiment or another

After an experiment is finished, Google will **re-rank search results** accordingly. So while Google may not have confirmed using click data to re-rank the search results in real time, they sure are using it in experiments and re-rank the results once the experiment is complete.

In other words, we're still not sure if they do this:

Gather click data for search results -> Determine an unusual range of clicks for result A -> Re-rank the result accordingly

But we now know for sure they do this:

Swap results A and B on page 1 of search results -> Gather click data for search results -> Determine an unusual range of clicks for result A -> Re-rank the result accordingly

Tomayto tomahto, if you ask me. For SEOs, this still means that click data is important for rankings — and it's just another reason to optimize your Google snippets.

Actionable tip

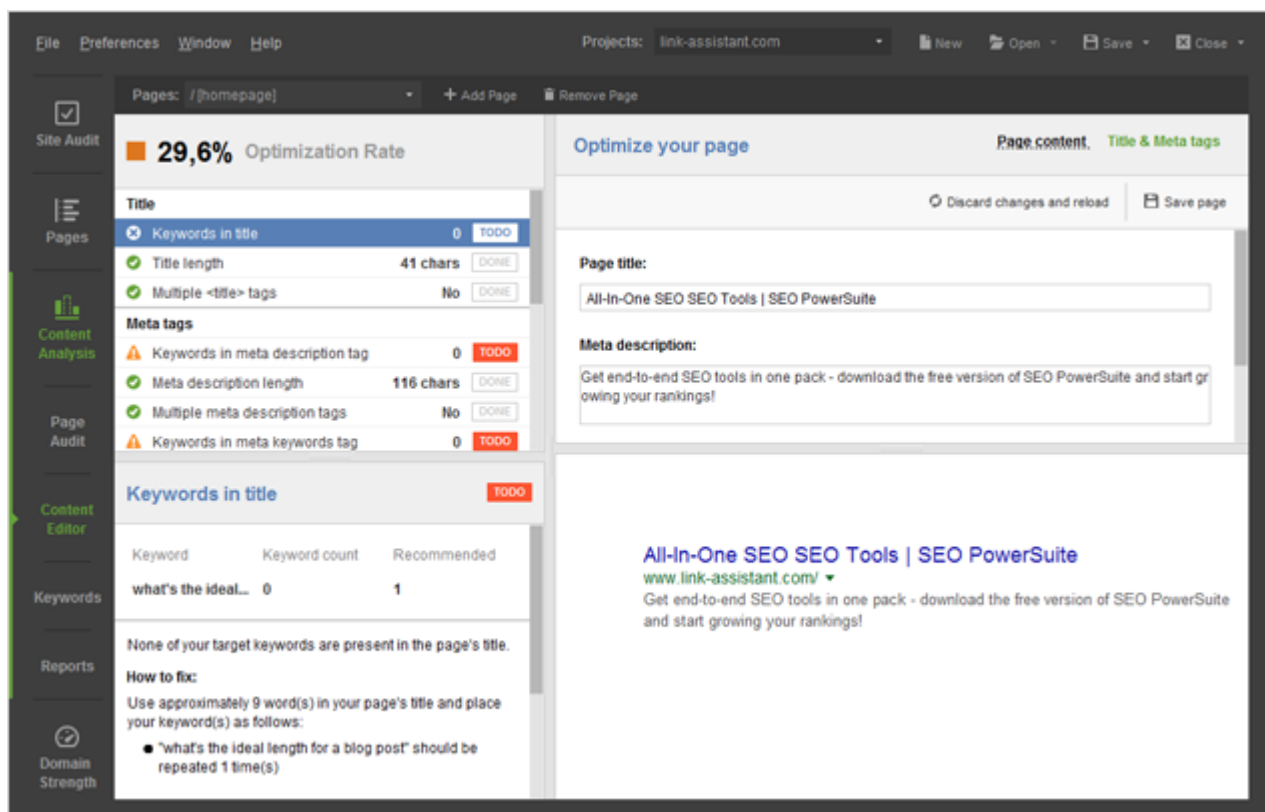
The logical prerequisite of a good SERP click-through rate is a click-worthy snippet, so the first thing to do is check on your snippets' current click-through rates in Google Search Console to identify the ones you need to focus on first.

Consider A/B testing your snippets if you do PPC, and then incorporating the insights you get from those tests into the snippet of your organic listing.

To edit and play around with your snippet with a Google SERP preview, launch [SEO PowerSuite](#)'s WebSite Auditor, go to *Content Analysis* -> *Content Editor*, and switch to the *Title & Meta tags* tab.

As you compose your title and description, make sure they clearly communicate the value of clicking through to your page to searchers. If appropriate, use a call to action and instead of simply describing what your page is about, address the searcher directly, and inform them about the benefits of navigating to your page, choosing your product, and so on.

Once you're happy with your snippet, hit *Save page* to save the upload-ready HTML file to your hard drive.



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In summary, we can totally see how quickly SEO is changing — often in ways we could not have predicted. This way, search engines are keeping the game hard, fair, and — if you think about it — interesting.

Which of the factors above do you think will affect SEO most in the coming months? As always, I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts and questions in the comments!



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